



September 1994

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Gutierrez, Lorraine M. (1994) "Beyond Coping: An Empowerment Perspective on Stressful Life Events," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol21/iss3/13>

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Beyond Coping: An Empowerment Perspective on Stressful Life Events

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Research on stressful life events has demonstrated their negative effects on health and mental health. The possibility of empowerment, how individuals can take action to change their situations, has been largely overlooked by this research. Empowerment theory and research suggest that the outcome of stressful life events can be less debilitating when individuals are encouraged to identify with similar others, to develop specific skills, to perceive the societal or institutional components of their problems, and to engage in change on a collective level. This article develops this perspective by proposing how an empowerment perspective can enhance our understanding of the coping process.

A large body of social science research has investigated the negative effects of stressful life experiences on health, mental health and other aspects of individual functioning. This literature has focused primarily on the debilitating affects of stress and the ongoing difficulties individuals experience following a stressful event. What this research has overlooked is the recent work on empowerment: how some individuals who experience stress can respond by taking positive action to change their situations in an active, outwardly focused, way. This article is a first attempt to examine theory and knowledge regarding the empowerment and coping processes in an effort to gain a greater understanding of how individuals can respond effectively to stressful life events. This examination can contribute to both fields. The literature on coping can inform our understanding of the experiences of less powerful groups and provide insights into the psychological process of empowerment. Information on empowerment can expand our thinking about the relationship between mental health and stress to include the group and community levels of analysis and suggest ways in which responses to stress can contribute to proactive change.

The literature on empowerment and on coping have much in common. Both deal with elusive phenomena which have been difficult to define and study (Hobfoll, 1989; Zimmerman, 1990b). Both are concerned with issues of control and mastery over the environment, including cognitive and affective processes and observable changes in behavior. A difference between these literatures is in their perspectives on the social environment beyond the individual level. Both literatures recognize the importance of social support, however, the social environment is the primary target and means for intervention and change in the empowerment literature. Much of the work on coping looks at how individuals adjust to stressful events, while the empowerment perspective is concerned with how people, individually and in groups, actively attempt to change or eliminate stressful and unjust conditions. Consequently, the coping literature has described most victims as reacting to stress with feelings of self blame and depression, while the empowerment literature has described ways in which individuals have made efforts to influence social policy and to improve social conditions for themselves and others.

The major questions addressed by this article are the following: What do the literatures on coping and empowerment tell us about reactions to stressful events? Can these two perspectives inform one another? In what ways are they irreconcilable? What does this perspective suggest for the field of social work? These questions are addressed by defining the concept of empowerment, by briefly summarizing the literature on stress and coping, and then by discussing how these two perspectives inter-relate. The final section specifies some of the implications for social work research.

Defining Empowerment

Empowerment involves the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations. It has become a popular concept or goal for health and social service professionals in a number of fields although the use of the term within and between fields has been inconsistent (Gutiérrez,

1990). Many authors define empowerment literally and depict it as the process of increasing group power or control (Albee, 1986; Wolf, 1986). Conversely, empowerment has also been described as the development of feelings of increased power or control without an actual change in structural arrangements (Pinderhughes, 1989; Sherman & Wenocur, 1983; Simmons & Parsons, 1983). Only recently have practitioners and scholars begun to grapple with the interface of these two approaches: how individual empowerment can contribute to group empowerment and how the increase in power to groups can enhance the functioning of individuals (Gutiérrez, 1990; Kahn & Bender, 1985; Kieffer, 1984; Rappaport, 1985; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

The empowerment perspective taken in this article is grounded in a conflict analysis which assumes that societies consist of separate groups possessing different levels of power and control over resources. The focus of empowering practice is on the experience of oppressed groups whose individual members are hampered both concretely and psychologically by their lack of access to power and resources (Pinderhughes, 1989; Solomon, 1976). This perspective on empowerment has centered on understanding how individuals develop a sense of personal control and the ability to effect the behavior of others, enhancing the existing strengths in individuals or communities, establishing equity in the distribution of resources, an ecological (rather than individual) analysis for understanding individual and community phenomena, and a belief that power is not a scarce commodity but one which can be generated in the process of empowerment (Gutiérrez, 1990; Kieffer, 1984; Rappaport, 1987). Research in this area has focused on identifying psychological elements of the empowerment process (Gutiérrez, 1989; Kieffer, 1984; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988); developing and testing empowering interventions (Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Gutiérrez & Ortega, 1991; Serrano-Garcia, 1984; Simmons & Parsons, 1983); and studying groups of empowered individuals (Kieffer, 1984; Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Pretsby, Wandersman, Florin, Rich & Chavis, 1990; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Although much of this research is in the exploratory stages some major issues and themes can be identified which characterize the process of empowerment.

The literature on empowerment describes a processes of change which occurs on the individual, interpersonal, and political levels. These three levels together work toward assisting individuals to develop a sense of personal power, an ability to influence others, and an ability to work with others to change social institutions (Gutiérrez, 1990; Kieffer, 1984; Zimmerman, 1990a). A number of psychological changes and social experiences have been identified which can contribute to this process of empowerment. The language used to describe these changes and experiences and the relative emphasis placed on them are influenced by the discipline of the author and whether their focus has been primarily on the societal or individual aspects of empowerment. In an effort to define some common themes across this literature, the change processes of empowerment can be conceptualized as consisting of at least four sub-processes which are described in the following ways:

Increasing self efficacy: Bandura (1982) defines self-efficacy as referring to beliefs about one's ability "to produce and to regulate events in [one's] life." (p.122) Although this term is not used in all of the empowerment literature, authors describe similar changes such as strengthening ego functioning, developing a sense of personal power or strength, developing a sense of mastery, developing client initiative, or increasing the individual's ability to act (Garvin, 1985; Pinderhughes, 1989; Solomon, 1976; Zimmerman, 1990a).

Developing a critical consciousness involves increasing an awareness of how political structures affect individual and group experience. Critical consciousness can result in a perspective on society which redefines individual, group, or community problems as emerging from a lack of power. Critical consciousness has three cognitive components: an identification with similar others, a reduction of self blame for past events, and a sense of personal responsibility for solving future problems (Friere, 1973; Gutiérrez, 1990; Keefe, 1980; Kieffer, 1984; Solomon, 1976).

Developing skills: Skill development allows individuals to develop the resources to be more powerful on the individual, interpersonal, or political levels. Research on empowering organizations has found that participation in community and mutual

aid groups which encourage skill development can be an important link in the process of empowerment (Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Reischel, Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1986; Pretsby, et al, 1990).

Involvement with similar others: Contact with others sharing a similar status or problem situation can occur in an informal or formal context. This contact is most useful when it occurs within mutual aid, self help, or voluntary organizations which have been organized to provide emotional or concrete assistance and support (Chessler & Chesney, 1988; Garvin, 1985; Gutiérrez & Ortega, 1991; Kahn & Bender, 1985; Kieffer, 1984; Reischel, Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1986).

Although these subprocess have been described in a specific order, it is not to suggest that the empowerment process occurs in a series of stages. Instead these sub-process often occur simultaneously and work to enhance one another. For example, self-efficacy can be enhanced as skills are developed and involvement with similar others can facilitate the development of critical consciousness. Those who have studied the process closely suggest that one does not necessary "achieve empowerment" but that it is actually a continual process of growth and change which can occur throughout the lifecycle (Friere, 1973; Kieffer, 1984; Zimmerman, 1990b). Rather than being a specific state, it is a way of interacting with the world.

Concepts of Stress and Coping

Research on stressful life events evolved from attempts to account for the positive correlation found between life events and poor health or mental health outcomes. Stressful life events have been defined as life experiences which exceed the individual's capacity to respond effectively (Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The effects of these experiences can either be short term and intense, such as with brief medical procedures; long term and sequential, such as with divorce; or made up of chronic strain, such as a diagnosis of cancer (Hobfoll, 1989; Moos & Billings, 1982). Long term effects are not unusual, for example of those who had lost a child or spouse in auto accident about 40% were still found to be ruminating about the

experience 4-7 years later (Lehman et al, 1989). The literature identifies many different kinds of impacts on the individual, but most center on feelings of loss of control, the experience of shattered assumptions, and initial denial of the severity of the situation (Kessler, Price & Wortman, 1985). These impacts may account in part for the significant association (about .40) consistently found between negative life events and psychological disturbance (Thoits, 1983).

Research on coping considers all the responses made by an individual experiencing a potentially harmful outcome, including behaviors, cognitions, emotional reactions, and physiological responses (Hobfoll, 1989; Kessler, Price & Wortman, 1985). Coping efforts can be appraisal-focused, problem-focused, or emotion-focused (Moos & Billings, 1982), and therefore can be oriented toward preventing the stressful situation, altering the stressful situation, changing the meaning of stressful situation, or managing the symptoms of stress (Pearlin & Aneshensel, 1986). An accurate appraisal of the source of stress is crucial, as emotion-focused coping is most effective when not much can be done to change the environment and problem-focused coping is most effective when conditions can be changed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The coping perspective is primarily individually focused and considers the proximal and distal social environment only to the extent that it affects the ability to achieve homeostasis. Based on a systems analysis, the desired outcome of dealing with stress is to return to an effective level of social functioning. Although Lazarus (1984) and others describe problem focused coping as those methods which focus on modifying the social environment, most of the literature pays little attention to ways in which a negative social environment, which can be creating stress, can be directly challenged or changed.

Much of the coping research has identified internal, interpersonal, and external factors which can facilitate coping. Internal, or individual factors which assist coping include behavioral self blame (Frieze, Hyman, & Greenberg, 1987); experiencing feelings of choice and self control (Rodin & Langer, 1977; Thompson, 1981); accurately appraising the stressful event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); finding some meaning from the experience;

gaining a sense of mastery over the situation; feeling responsible for future outcomes (Brickman, et. al., 1982); good ego development and social and problem solving skills (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Methany, et al, 1986; Moos & Billings, 1982); denial concerning the event and its outcomes (Janoff-Bulman & Timko, 1987; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); physical health and energy; positive beliefs (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); personality factors, such as hardiness (Wortman, 1983); and learned resourcefulness (Rosenbaum, 1983).

Interpersonal and external factors which facilitate coping have also been identified. The presence of social support can have a positive effect on the coping process (Kessler, Turner & House, 1988). Dimensions of social support which have been found to be especially effective are those which enhance the self, support collective action (Pearlin & Aneshensel, 1986; Wortman, 1983), provide an opportunity for ventilation, (Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986; Silver, et. al., 1983); allow contact with similar others (Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986); and provide emotional support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). External factors which have been associated with effective coping include a large social network; instrumental social support which provides concrete help (Pearlin & Aneshensel, 1986; Wortman, 1983); and access to material resources (Kessler, Turner & House, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Moos & Billings, 1976).

When these internal, interpersonal, or external conditions are not present, coping may not be as effective. For example, the lack of a social network, the inability to ventilate, and poor self concept all provide a poor basis for dealing with life stress (Kessler, Price & Wortman, 1985). The nature of the life event can make effective coping especially difficult. Research has consistently found a strong association between undesirable, uncontrollable, and unexpected major life events and poor psychological outcomes (Pearlin & Aneshensel, 1986; Thoits, 1983). Another consideration is the magnitude or complexity of the problem, as described by Pearlin & Aneshensel (1986):

Many life conditions that threaten health are simply not responsive to individual coping efforts and social supports. Extreme

economic deprivation, continued involuntary unemployment, being trapped in a depersonalized job setting, and having responsibility for young children as a single parent are a few examples of situations that may be stubbornly resistant, if not impervious, to coping efforts and social supports (p. 27).

This suggests that some life events may be so overwhelming or complex that they exceed the coping capacity of any individual. They may be more amenable to group or collective solutions, such as those described in the empowerment literature (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

Empowerment and the Coping Process

Theory and research on coping and empowerment have developed separately and with different foci for concern, can they inform one another? This exploration will begin by looking at some general areas of convergence and points of departure between these two perspectives.

One important similarity is the emphasis placed on the *interaction of the person and the environment*. Both perspectives consider the social environment as contributing to social and emotional well being. A basic assumption of the life stress and coping field is that psychological functioning is affected by external stimuli and that symptoms such as anxiety or depression do not necessarily arise from underlying psychopathology (Hobfoll, 1989; Kessler, Price & Wortman, 1985). The empowerment perspective also focuses on the person/environment interaction, but from the standpoint of wellness, competence, and control. It suggests that empowering interactions and institutions can be an important mediator of stressful life experiences by encouraging healthy and action oriented responses to the social environment (Zimmerman, 1990a).

Therefore, one major difference between these two perspectives relates to their orientation toward the fit between individuals and their environments. The coping perspective has most typically looked at how the person/environmental fit can be improved upon by making changes on the individual or psychological level. The emphasis has been on how the individual changes his or her cognitions, emotions, or behaviors to manage

life stresses (Hobfoll, 1989). Only when describing problem focused coping is the stressor or social environment the target for change and in most cases these changes are minimal and proximal. In contrast, the empowerment perspective focuses almost exclusively on how environments can be modified to improve the person/environmental fit. The assumption is that the social environment in its present state can not be supportive of members of oppressed groups, who because of their status are more likely to experience stressful events. The orientation is toward identifying and creating social environments which will maximize the functioning of all individuals and communities (Rappaport, 1987).

Both perspectives also concern themselves with an *individual's experience of control* of the social environment. Experiencing the loss of control is one critical factor influencing the psychological impact of stressful life events (Rodin & Langer, 1977; Thompson, 1981; Wortman et. al, 1980). These feelings can challenge assumptions about the world and one's ability to control outcomes and therefore heighten feelings of anxiety and arousal (Thompson, 1981). In response, causal attributions, which place blame or responsibility for the event on the individual, can enhance feelings of control over the environment (Coates, Wortman, & Abby, 1980).

This literature is limited as it does not fully explore how environmental conditions can affect the experience of loss of control. The empowerment perspective relates the ability to feel in control, and to have control, as linked to one's personal, interpersonal, or political power. In order to have control, individuals must first have the resources and ability to express and act upon their goals and desires. This is supported by research which found that individuals which had more control over some elements of their environment had better health outcomes than those who did not (Rodin & Langer, 1977). Illusions of control, and self blame may help people to feel better but they may interfere with processes which would allow them to more accurately identify the source of their problems and act upon that appraisal.

Research on psychological empowerment also suggests that social interaction can have a positive effect on the experience

of the loss of control. Zimmerman (1990) proposes that learned hopefulness can be developed as a means for regaining a sense of control, mediating stress, and improving problem solving capacity. Learned hopefulness can develop in situations in which individuals experience success and develop the skills to realistically appraise their ability to control a specific situation. Research on learned hopefulness suggests that it can be generated through participation in empowering organizations and can contribute to a sense of psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1990).

Both the literatures on empowerment and coping describe *involvement with similar others as an important process*. Good social support has been identified as a significant mediator of life stress. The best form of social support takes place in involvement with others who have experienced similar stresses (Brickman, et. al., 1982; Coates, Wortman, & Abby, 1979; Kessler, Price & Wortman, 1985). These studies suggest that similar others are more likely to be accepting of others, more capable of supporting the need to ventilate, more capable of providing accurate information or advice, and perhaps more capable of playing a role in anticipatory socialization. In combination, these factors facilitate the coping process.

Within the empowerment literature involvement with like others is also identified as leading to positive outcomes by providing individuals with a basis of social support through the change process, with a format for providing mutual aid, with the opportunity to learn new skills through role modeling, and with a potential power base for future action (Chesney & Chessler, 1988; Gutiérrez & Ortega, 1991; Keefe, 1980; Pinderhughes, 1989; Reischl, Zimmerman, Rappaport, 1986). In many respects some form of group contact, either participation in mutual aid or voluntary organizations, is presented as a necessary condition for psychological empowerment (Garvin, 1985; Gutiérrez & Ortega, 1991; Kieffer, 1984). Research on the empowerment process suggests that the role of the group leader as a facilitator of interpreting experience and developing skills can be crucial if group interaction is to contribute to empowerment (Gutiérrez & Ortega, 1991; Kieffer, 1984; Pretsby, et al, 1990).

The *development of specific skills* has also been described as a method of improving coping and facilitating an empowerment

process. In relation to empowerment, skill development is one way in which individuals can build their social power through problem solving, community or organizational change, life skills development, or interpersonal skills such as assertiveness, social competency, or self advocacy (Checkoway & Norseman, 1986; Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Garvin, 1985; Keefe, 1980; Kieffer, 1984; Pretsby, et al, 1990; Sherman & Wenocur, 1983; Solomon, 1976).

The coping literature also identifies specific skills which have been related to positive outcomes. Social skills can facilitate coping because they can enable the individual to utilize social support more effectively, allow greater control in interaction with others, and facilitate joint problem solving (Moos & Billings, 1982; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-solving skills can assist coping by providing a rational means for dealing with stress and concrete issues (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cognitive skills, such as learned resourcefulness, can provide a means for regulating internal events and for appraising situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Rosenbaum, 1983).

The skill areas identified by these two literatures are not dissimilar. Both identify social skills and problem solving skills as contributing to the coping or empowerment processes. Research on learned hopefulness suggests that cognitive processes and skills can contribute to psychological empowerment. Both of these perspective emphasize the important role skills can play in dealing with stress.

However, a critical difference between these perspectives is the emphasis placed on *comprehending the larger social environment*. Although the coping literature describes how an accurate appraisal of the stressful experience can maximize coping efforts (Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) it does not recognize the role which critical consciousness can play in affecting ones reaction to stress (Friere, 1973; Gutiérrez, 1989; Kieffer, 1984). Critical consciousness differs from the appraisal process because it is not oriented totally on one's personal experience and one discrete event.

Research from the coping literature can explain how developing a critical consciousness can contribute to the empowerment process by directly effecting appraisal. When engaged in the process of appraisal the individual assesses the nature

of the stress and whether problem-focused or emotion-focused coping would be more efficacious (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This process is strongly affected by the individual's world view (Wortman, 1983). The coping literature suggests that group contact and identification may allow individuals to feel less to blame and less stigmatized for their situation and more capable as a group to effect constructive change (Brickman, et al, 1982; Pearlin & Aneshensel, 1986). Therefore individuals who have developed a sense of critical consciousness and who interact with similar others may be more likely to identify external causes for their distress and be more motivated to engage in efforts to change the social structural sources of stress (Bandura, 1982; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Gutiérrez & Ortega, 1991).

This discussion illuminates how knowledge about empowerment can create a more holistic understanding of how individuals react to situations of injustice, powerlessness, and stress. Increasing feelings of control, having contact with similar others and developing skills can contribute both to empowerment and effective coping. The major area of difference centers on the role of the group and critical consciousness. The coping literature describes individual phenomena and has largely overlooked how group efforts and an understanding of social structures can contribute to more active efforts to increase individual, group, or community power. The empowerment literature which identifies group interaction and collective action as crucial elements of the change process can begin to explain why some victims of stressful events have been moved to take political action. It encourages us to look at "victims" of stress as potential participants in social transformation and recognizes the crucial role which appraisal, skills, and social interaction can play in determining how individuals react to stress.

A Research Agenda on Empowerment and Coping

This perspective is of significance to social workers who are interested in creating structures and programs which can mediate the effects of stress and encourage empowerment. It is of particular importance to those of us who concern ourselves with individuals, groups, and communities on the margins of

society who are likely to experience severe life stresses due to societal injustice and inadequate access to social resources (Albee, 1986; Gutiérrez, 1990). Research and practice in social work which looks at social systems primarily from a stress and coping perspective will not adequately consider how the social environment can be modified or understand how participation in social action or mutual aid can have a positive affect on health and mental health. An orientation which extends information on the stress and coping process to include empowerment can give us the means to understand how individuals, communities, and groups can move from frustration, inaction, and fear to efficacy, action, and participation in social change. A program of research on empowerment and coping can advance our field to begin to understand these process in more depth and to identify ways in which this new perspective can be put into practice.

This research agenda must be conducted from an empowerment perspective. It requires action research carried out collaboratively with the groups who will ultimately benefit from the development of this knowledge and practice (Sohng, 1992; Sommer, 1990). These articles, and others, spell out some of the assumptions, methods and contradictions involved in carrying out this kind of research agenda. Much of the previous research on empowerment has been conducted with efforts to use these methods and orientations and it has expanded our knowledge on empowerment processes of the chronically mentally ill (Rose & Black, 1985), mutual aid groups (Checkoway & Norseman, 1986; Chessler & Chesney, 1988), voluntary organizations (Pretsby, et al, 1990; Florin & Wandersman, 1990); adolescents (Simmons & Parsons, 1983) and African American single parents (Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1992). This is in contrast with the coping literature, which has less often been carried out collaboratively or grounded in the context of the groups in question. The creation of ecologically oriented action research to investigate reactions to stressful events can create greater insights into these processes and their interaction.

Research in this area could place its primary focus on individuals and groups which are experiencing stressful life events. This could include the groups cited above as well as others such as survivors of family violence, the chronically ill and

their families, homeless individuals and families, and others living below the poverty level. The overall goal of this research would be to develop knowledge which could provide us with the means to create policies, organizations, and programs which would enhance their empowerment. A first task would be to observe and document the coping and empowerment process and begin to identify common responses to life stress in order to develop a better "mapping" of the the individual/environmental fit. For example, in doing research with survivors of family violence we may observe that for most the first reactions to violence may involve emotion-focused coping in a need to establish a feeling of equilibrium. However, in carrying out this research over time we could observe a range of long term reactions to violence and how they could be influenced by such factors as the involvement of survivors in mutual aid groups, in skill development programs, and in accessing protection from the legal system. These external factors, in combination with other more individual, familial, or cultural factors could influence the movement of some individuals from a coping to an empowerment response. This initial, naturalistic, research can help us to further identify those individual, group, organizational, cultural and structural factors which in interaction can influence the processes of coping and empowerment.

The literatures on coping and empowerment have largely overlooked the possible impact of gender, ethnicity, and class. Although each body of research has involved individuals from different populations, rarely has the meaning of membership in a particular gender, racial, ethnic, or class group been related to the empowerment or coping process. Given the large body of research which has demonstrated the importance of these variables to mental health, cognition, and behavior, more information is needed on how these variables, and our experiences of them, have an influence on coping and empowerment. For example, research on group consciousness has consistently found that members of ethnic minority groups and the poor are more likely to have a critical orientation to the social structure (Gurin, Miller, & Gurin, 1980; Gutiérrez, 1989; Kleugel & Smith, 1986). This suggests that they may engage in a different process of developing critical consciousness than members of majority

groups and that critical consciousness may play a different role in the empowerment process for different groups.

This research could also investigate the impact of individual variables on coping and empowerment. The literature on coping identifies individual factors which facilitate coping, in particular personality traits and beliefs which are most compatible with an individually based means of dealing with stress. For example, hardy individuals, field independent individuals, and "internal" individuals may be more compatible with coping efforts which are focused on individual effort because they perceive themselves as in control of their environment and independent of others (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Moos & Billings, 1982). One program of research could look at whether this individualistic orientation might interfere with an empowerment process which is oriented toward group advancement. Conversely, one could document whether the personality factors which have been identified as interfering with individually based coping would facilitate group empowerment rather than individual acceptance.

Another important area of research would be to further identify structural influences on the empowerment and coping process. Previous research has established that group contact and social support can have a positive effect, however more information is needed on the characteristics of empowering group structure and process and ways in which some group interactions may interfere with empowerment by reinforcing emotion focused appraisal and efforts when they are not appropriate. The importance of group interaction also suggests that the empowerment process can occur only when similar others are proximate and available. Research on whether it is possible to become empowered on an individual basis, without the support of and contact with a group could allow us to understand the relative importance of this subprocess.

This observational and naturalistic research could provide the basis for action research which could develop and pilot test interventions aimed at enhancing the empowering elements of the social environment. Potential beneficiaries of this research could collaborate with social workers to develop different methods to encourage empowerment and to evaluate these

interventions. One possible model for such research could look at the differential impact of the subprocesses of empowerment—increasing self efficacy, developing skills, developing a critical consciousness, and social interaction—in relation to one particular problem area and one particular group. Another important focus could be on methods involving more than one level of empowerment and looking at ways in which individuals can move from increasing their self efficacy to collaborating on community projects. A final focus could be on how the process of this participatory research could one way of increasing the three levels of empowerment (Gerschick, Israel, & Checkoway, 1990).

This research agenda can further clarify the empowerment processes. It can enrich the study of empowerment by grounding it in a research base. It would also enhance our understanding of stress and coping by bringing issues of power, and group experience, into consideration. Looking beyond coping to empowerment could bring some unity into the study of how individuals, and groups, deal with stress, loss of control, and powerlessness.

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An earlier version of this paper received the Henry J. Meyer Award at the University of Michigan for the best integration of social work and social science theory.

