Empowerment as a Dynamically Developing Concept for Practice: Lessons Learned from Organizational Ethnography

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This article describes the process of developing an empowerment approach in a comprehensive child development program that defined its mission as empowerment of families living in poverty. This description is derived from a seven-year organizational ethnographic research project that included data from participant observation, agency documents, individual interviews of staff and family participants, and focus group interviews with staff. Findings concerning empowerment are presented in two areas: (1) resolution of contrasts and dichotomies related to the nature of services, understanding staff roles, and working with the federal government; and (2) lessons learned for program effectiveness. Implications for empowerment-oriented social work practice and policy are offered.

Key words: *child development; empowerment; ethnography; organizations; poverty*

Considering the continuing popularity of empowerment as a rubric for practice, as well as the importance of knowing "what works," it is timely to consider what can be learned from comprehensive family services programs so that future efforts can have maximum success. Therefore, this article provides findings from a detailed analysis of the process of conceptualizing and implementing an empowerment approach as it unfolded over time, based on a seven-year organizational ethnography. The ethnography was conducted at Project EAGLE, a Comprehensive Child Development Program located in Kansas City, Kansas, which is an ethnically diverse midwestern urban area. EAGLE is an acronym for "early action guidance leading to empowerment." Project EAGLE served families with preschool-age children for a maximum of five years per family. This analysis produced a realistic portrait of empowerment practice in action, including key lessons learned that may benefit similar long-term family social services programs.

Establishment of Comprehensive Child Development Programs

Despite decades of government and private initiatives to reduce poverty, almost 13 percent of the U.S. population lives in poverty (Dalaker, 1999); one in five children live in families with incomes below the poverty line (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1999). Poverty presents a myriad of social problems that threaten children's development and families' well-being (Children's Defense Fund, 1990; National Commission on Children, 1991). In 1988 concern about the failure of programs to adequately address the needs of children at risk led to the establishment of Comprehensive Child Development Programs (CCDPs) that provided expanded services to families with children ages 0 to

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5 years (Comprehensive Child Development Centers Act of 1988, P. L. 100-297). Overseen by the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF), these comprehensive care programs focused on enhancing child development through empowerment-oriented work with the entire family. They addressed early childhood education and parenting education through a case management model including home- and agency-based early childhood education, family support and mental health services, adult education and job training, and coordination and integration of community-based services. A central mission was to enhance the development of children and families through empowerment (ACYF, 1991).

Empowerment Practice in Human Services Agencies as Defined in Social Work Literature

Although the term *empowerment* has become popular across disciplines and organizations and in policy discourse, it escapes easy definition. It is often used vaguely and polemically. It is given drastically different meanings, from Marxist radical activism to conservative capitalist "trickle down" economic programs (Holmes & Saleebey, 1993; Rappaport, 1984; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1998; Zippay, 1995). Yet, in the social work literature there are certain common themes that fall between these extremes.

To avoid vagueness and overgeneralization, the concept of empowerment is best understood as developed distinctively in particular settings and situations according to individual and environmental factors (Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991; Parsons, 1991; Pinderhughes, 1983; Rappaport, 1984; Saleebey, 1997; Weick & Saleebey, 1995). Nevertheless, most definitions of empowerment share in common the notion that it involves a process and outcomes whereby people, organizations, and communities increase or gain mastery and control over their lives and become active participants in efforts to influence their environment (Rappaport, 1987). For clients, empowerment involves a personal sense of self-efficacy and competence; a sense of responsibility to change self and social conditions based on critical consciousness of conditions that are oppressive; skills to affect the behavior of others and to work in solidarity with others to obtain needed resources; and planning and implementation of social action efforts to remove power blocks and create liberating conditions (Freire, 1973; Gutierrez, 1990; Kieffer, 1984; Lee, 1994; Rappaport, 1984; Robbins et al., 1998; Solomon, 1976; Staples, 1990). Moreover, empowerment results from the interaction of people in micro- and mesosystems within the macrosystemic context of sociopolitical institutions, policies, and cultural patterns.

In recent years many human services organizations have followed a path similar to the CCDPs. They have come to recognize the importance of empowerment-based practice when working with disenfranchised families (Hasenfeld, 1996; Hasenfeld & Chesler, 1989; Hodges, Burwell, & Ortega, 1998; Parsons, 1991; Reissman, 1990; Solomon, 1987). Generally, the goal of empowerment-based practice is to help families acquire the power, resources, and skills to gain control over their lives, attain their goals, and ensure their children's well-being (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988).

Until recently, knowledge of how an empowerment approach develops in an organization has been conceptual and conjectural in nature (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Shera & Page, 1995). Few studies have reported on the perceptions of staff describing this experience (Gutierrez, GlenMaye, & DeLois, 1995). Recognizing staff as primary informants is not only relevant to data gathering but also consistent with an empowerment paradigm for research, which requires that people who are being studied are actively involved in the study process itself and that both process and results of research contribute to their empowerment (Fine, 1992; Rapp, Shera, & Kisthardt, 1993). This article begins to fill this gap by reporting results of a seven-year organizational ethnography of the developmental history of a CCDP that defined its mission as empowerment of low-income families and their children.

Method

The U.S. Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF) provided funding for each CCDP, including Project EAGLE, to conduct an organizational ethnography for the first five years of its operation. ACYF and its research consultants, CSR, Inc., provided standard guidelines and research questions for ethnographers. During the sixth year of serving families, Project EAGLE became one of the first Early Head Start projects and provided its own funding for the organizational ethnography. Project EAGLE hired the ethnographic team (that is, the first three authors of this

article) to conduct a yearlong qualitative meta-analysis of the findings from the grant development year and the first five years of operation to understanding how empowerment unfolded in concept and practice and to formulate lessons learned for the benefit of future work. This article is a summary of the findings that may have relevance for other empowerment-oriented human services organizations.

Throughout the six years of funded research, and a prior year of planning and project grant development, the third author developed the design and provided supervision of research teams (for a total of seven years). The first and second authors were involved in this research for several years. The design was based on principles of naturalistic (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and empowerment-oriented research (Holman, 1987; Lincoln, 1995; Rapp et al., 1993; Sample, 1996; Zarb, 1992). In naturalistic research, qualitative methods are used to identify the ways people behave and make meaning within natural daily life settings. The emphasis is on presenting portraits of participants' experiences that are faithful to their self-understandings and the dynamic, complex, and changing contexts of their lives. Empowerment-oriented research adds a political focus to the naturalistic approach. It gives priority to topics pertinent to the benefit of oppressed or disenfranchised groups and to collaborative methods that include research participants or their representatives in the design, conduct, and results of studies in such a way that they receive direct benefits. The blend of naturalistic and empowerment principles suited this study well, because the research purpose was to formulate a realistic contextual understanding of how the concept of empowerment developed in Project EAGLE for the benefit of agency staff, their family participants, and staff and families within similar projects. In addition, this design demonstrated congruency between the empowerment-oriented values of the agency and the conduct of the researchers.

During the first six years, data were gathered through participant observation of staff meetings, home visits, and daily operations; individual and group interviews of staff, family participants, and community representatives; and agency documents. Federal program administrators, agency administrators, direct services staff, and an advisory board of participant family and community members provided ongoing feedback and guidance. During the seventh year, 16 earlier reports were analyzed concerning the development and implementation of empowerment practice. Tentative findings were presented to Project EAGLE staff in a brainstorming focus group interview (Krueger, 1994) to refine the findings and to explicate lessons learned from the seven years of experience that could benefit Project EAGLE and other similar projects.

Data were analyzed using the constant comparison method typical for naturalistic research. During the seventh year, thematic categories pertaining to the concept of empowerment were developed inductively as research team members examined the text in each report, compared observations, and came to agreement about each major theme and subthemes. Portions of each document that pertained to each theme were then coded and compared with all other coded portions of other documents. Patterns of themes and subthemes were formulated and presented to all available staff in the focus group described earlier. Observation notes and tape-recorded transcripts from this focus group were analyzed as well. Conclusions were reviewed for clarification or correction in an interview with Project EAGLE's director, who had been with the project since its inception, after analysis of the focus group, and again in preparation of this article. In recognition of her significant input and support throughout the seven years of research and in keeping with the collaborative value in empowerment research, she has been listed as a coauthor of this study. Therefore, the findings represent a summary statement of the insights gleaned collectively from staff, researchers, the project director, and, indirectly, from participant families and community members.

Rigor of the research throughout the seven years was supported by many procedures consistent with naturalistic and empowerment research. For example, credibility (realistic portrayal of participants' views and data sources) was supported by the researchers' high degree of familiarity with the project, acquired through many years of engagement. Triangulation of many data sources (such as interviews with all levels of staff, family participants, community members; written documents; extensive participant observation) throughout this long period meant that no one point of view or point in time would be overemphasized. By comparing many sources of information, the

accuracy of various accounts could be checked. Participants were consulted throughout the process regarding the faithfulness of researchers' understandings and presentations of the project's experience. Federal-level evaluators also reviewed and critiqued reports for five years to ensure high quality.

Updating and explaining research methodology approximately every four months over six years and having it reviewed by federal evaluators and Project EAGLE's director ensured the dependability of the research methods. Also, a record of all products from data collection, analysis, and reports was kept so that final conclusions by the researchers could be traced back to original sources for accuracy. In keeping with human subjects' protection standards, all regulations established by the university research institutional review board and federal guidelines were upheld. In keeping with empowerment principles for high-quality research, all research activities were conducted to produce insights that would be understandable and useful to project staff for the benefit of low-income families participating in the project, with significant involvement of project staff in all stages of the research process.

Concept and Practice of Empowerment in Organizational Life

The themes that emerged from this analysis relate to refinement of the conceptualization and practice of empowerment during the first five years of Project EAGLE's operation. These themes center on staff perceptions of contrasts between aspects of empowerment that became apparent as the ideal conception met the practical daily reality of services delivery. As the perceived contrasts and their related ambiguities or tensions were addressed over time, staff came to view them in one of three ways: (1) as complementary aspects that supported each other; (2) as encompassing aspects, in that one aspect came to be seen as comprehensive, including the other aspects; or (3) as polarized aspects that remained in tension or conflict. These themes illustrate that empowerment practice at Project EAGLE was a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. In the following discussion, pairs of contrasting aspects are organized according to three prominent issues for services delivery: (1) how to design and deliver services; (2) how to define staff roles in relation to family, community, and other staff; and (3) how the local agency should relate to federally determined program requirements.

Nature of Services

Client or Community Change Focus of Services

Although direct client support services and community networking and community-based family support services were planned to be complementary from the beginning of the project, the initial focus was to help the participant families become oriented to the project and handle various life crises. Project EAGLE's main approach was to help each family achieve its goals for healthy child development and overall family well-being. Early community action efforts centered on obtaining, coordinating, and integrating existing services to meet participant family's needs through more than 100 interagency agreements and the development of a comprehensive case management services model. As this was being accomplished, the community change focus could be given increasing attention.

Eventually, staff concluded that client change and community change must be viewed as interdependent, necessary, and complementary for long-term empowerment of families. Yet, maintaining this dual focus continued to be challenging for several reasons: the amount of time for staff training and activities necessary to prepare them for this complex form of practice; the increasing demands of families as they anticipated completion of their participation in Project EAGLE (a five-year limit); the complexity of designing programs and services to address both family and community dynamics; and changes in federal funding for Comprehensive Child Development Programs.

Although family and community change efforts became more balanced and complementary, the primary emphasis for community action remained on increasing aid for families served by the project. However, this community action led to wider effects in other community activities and agencies. Examples of community system effects included extensive cross training of staff in cooperating agencies and later adoption by other community agencies; increase in the willingness of certain employers to hire parents served by the project as well as other parents from low-income sectors of the community; replication of aspects of the project's comprehensive family services model in

other community agencies; training of child care workers to improve the quality and quantity of affordable child care for those served by the project as well as other children in the community; and adoption of numerous formal and informal interagency agreements and strategies to coordinate services across many types of community support systems, such as social welfare, health, mental health, employment, education, and transportation.

Emphasis on Tangible or Intangible Aspects of Services

Although tangible services for families (such as help finding affordable housing, job training, or providing medical screenings) received more attention initially, intangible services (such as providing a high-quality helping relationship based on empathy, individualized service planning, and a strengths perspective) were always emphasized in the worker–family relationship. Staff sought to make both tangible and intangible aspects of services complementary for the achievement of self-sufficiency and empowerment. Although tangible services were given more attention by the federal government in measures of agency regulation compliance and client goal attainment, staff came to view effects of tangible services as less permanent and substantial than the effects gained from intangible aspects of services. Staff believed that material resources obtained through tangible services allowed families the time and energy to benefit from intangible services. In their view, without intangible services, the program may have reinforced an unrealistically narrow definition of empowerment as only economic self-sufficiency, rather than a broader, holistic definition of empowerment involving helping families in all aspects of their lives. Intangible services also promoted a high quality of life, even when quantity of resources available was scarce or tenuous. They provided the humane qualities essential for effective tangible services.

Standardized or Individualized Design of Services

Standardization of services was an essential component of Project EAGLE's case management design. Introduced as a federal requirement, it ensured consistency and continuity of services (mainly tangible) and provided data for outcome-oriented quantitative evaluation comparison of the various CCDPs around the country. Yet, staff reported that standardization sometimes inhibited their ability to provide for distinctive family needs and to develop a unique relationship with each family—a key intangible aspect of service for achieving empowerment.

For example, the requirement to maintain standard weekly home visits in the midst of the changing nature of family work patterns brought this contrast to light. It was especially apparent in families with a greater degree of economic self-sufficiency. Meeting the compliance requirements for frequent home visits for these families became more difficult as the families grew and changed and responded to the increasing demands put on family members who sought job preparation education and worked in the paid labor force, sometimes in multiple jobs and in irregular day and night shifts. Under these conditions, home visits meant interrupting family times for meals, togetherness, and rest. The ability to adjust participation requirements for some families was inhibited by the standardized participation requirements necessary for achieving compliance with federal standards. (See, "Standardized or Customized Approach to Services" under the Relationship with Federal Government heading, for further details.)

Staff Roles

Peer–Peer or Peer–Professional Model of Case Management

The case manager's role changed from a primarily peer role (that is, sharing a similar background to the clients and relating as a colleague with paraprofessional training) to that of a professional role (that is, adding professional education and experience qualifications to the peer roles of mentor and advocate). When the project began, it was assumed that a peer approach would make it easier for workers and families to have empathic and culturally congruent relationships. However, the demands of complex assessments, services, and documentation exceeded the knowledge and skills of many of the paraprofessional staff.

Several factors contributed to the evolution of the professional case managers' role. Complexity of work and an effort to lessen staff turnover led to a need for more formally qualified staff and to an increase in salary. This required an increase in formal education and job experience requirements for the case manager position. Yet, the

project continued to recognize that the relationship between the case manager and family was a central aspect of long-term empowerment practice. To resolve the tension between peer and professional approaches, the project added qualities of the professional model to the peer model, rather than simply replace a peer model with a professional model. In other words, the strengths of both collaborative style and professional expertise were combined. Although case managers were expected to have more advanced education and experience, they still were expected to practice as professionally skilled generalists to integrate and implement a comprehensive child development model. In addition, a collaborative strengths-based approach to relationships with families was formalized for case management (Saleebey, 1997).

Family or Community Change Focus in Supervisory Relationships

The supervisory role is related to the client and community focus under the nature of services theme, but it elaborates on the supervisory relationship between midlevel administrators who coordinated and supervised services and the case managers who carried out most of the direct family contacts. Although Project EAGLE focused mainly on family services, the director and midlevel administrative coordinators of the four service areas (that is, early childhood education, health, mental health, and adult education and job training) encouraged more community involvement as the project continued. This meant that case managers were encouraged to establish more connections with a wide variety of community-based support systems. To assist in this process, coordinators and case managers cooperated in home visits and case conferences. Simultaneously, coordinators' direct involvement in the community benefited participant families by enhancing the coordination and integration of community-based support systems. Through this cooperative approach to supervision, both case managers and coordinators helped each other become more involved with the community over time.

Relationship with Federal Government

Mission of Economic Self-Sufficiency or Overall Empowerment

The federal Administration on Children, Youth, and Families needed to standardize requirements for quality control and research purposes across all CCDP sites. This situation required Project EAGLE to focus on delivering and recording tangible services since they are easier to measure than the process and quality aspects of intangible services. In addition, during this time period, the national political climate influencing social policy was becoming increasingly conservative, emphasizing the importance of removing people from welfare rolls. This explains the tendency of the government to reduce family empowerment to a narrower mission of economic self-sufficiency such as "getting off welfare" (simultaneously focusing on child development) and the tangible services thought to lead to this end.

However, Project EAGLE refined its definition of empowerment as both a process and a set of outcomes, encompassing self-sufficiency with both economic and social aspects (see Figure 1). To the extent that federal administrators and researchers emphasized tangible aspects over intangible aspects, some staff perceived tension between economic self-sufficiency–related objectives and overall empowerment-related objectives. However, in the view of staff, empowerment ideally included but was not limited to economic self-sufficiency.

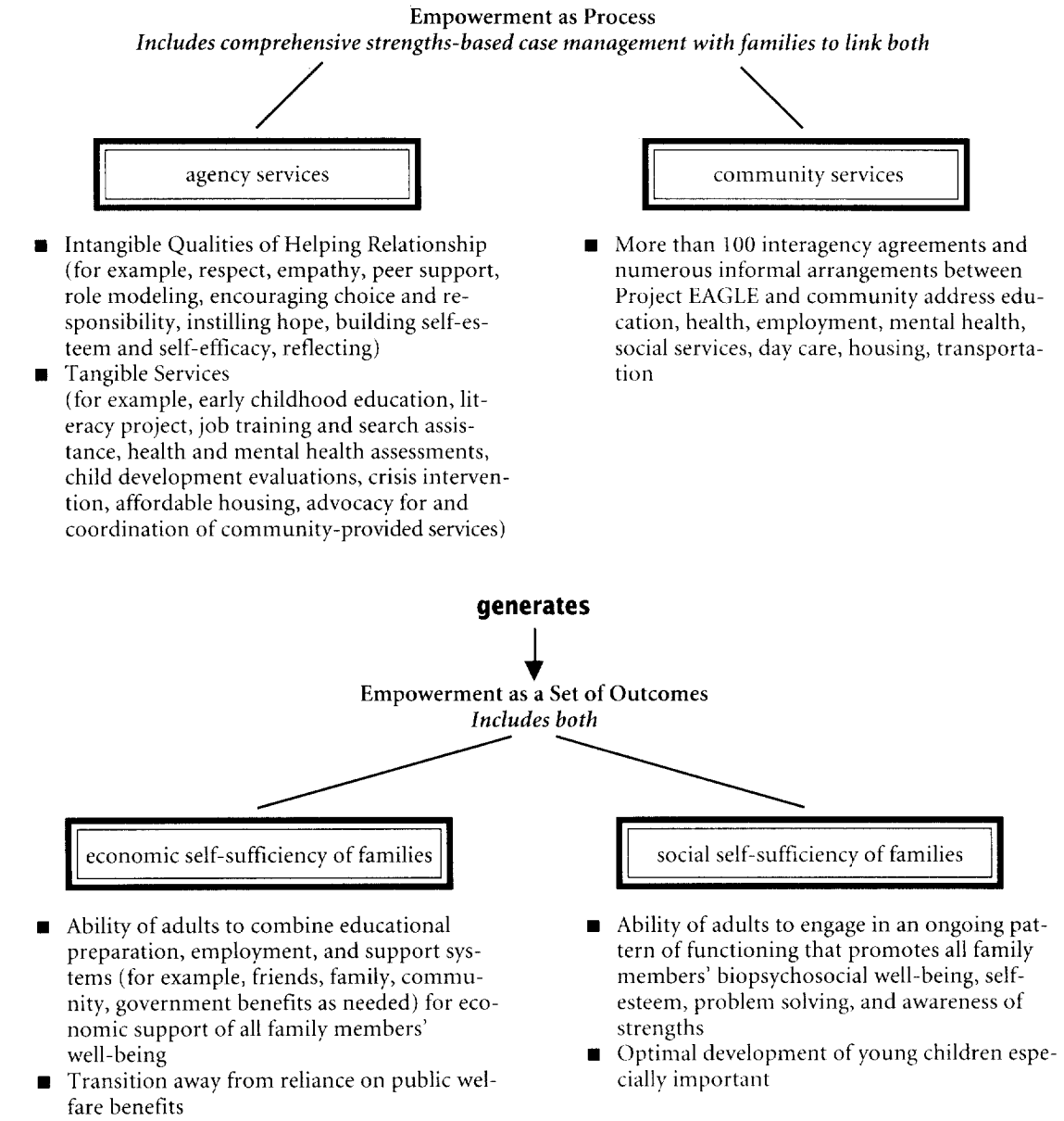
Standardized or Customized Approach to Services in Relation to Empowerment

Although the perceived tension between the standardized or customized nature of services have been discussed, staff sometimes perceived federal requirements as barriers to family empowerment because they constrained the flexibility and customization of individualized family services plans and required much time for documentation that took away from direct family contact. Staff perceived the federal program administrators as slow in responding to requests for adjusting compliance requirements to individual family needs and local situations.

Because the federal government's focus was on tangible services in regard to early childhood education and economic self-sufficiency, it did not include direct measurements or incentives for the intangible services and qualities related to empowerment. Although the federal government did show flexibility by changing some standards based on suggestions from local project administrators and staff around the country, the emphasis was on early childhood education and setting and

Figure 1

A Dynamic Conceptualization of Empowerment at Project EAGLE



achieving quantitatively measurable standards across all CCDPs. However, Project EAGLE administrators encouraged creative ways to customize services within federal guidelines and to provide sufficient time as needed per family to address many intangible services, such as family and staff member self-reflection. Administrators also helped case managers understand the need for research protocols for long-term improvements in programs, even though they required short-term inconvenience. By the end of the five-year service period, staff made efforts to achieve complementarities between standardization and customization of services, but still felt that the

intangible and customized aspects were not adequately recorded, counted, and accommodated by federal compliance measures. (See Figure 1 for examples of intangible versus tangible aspects of service provision.)

Lessons Learned

In focus groups to help staff reflect on the experience of Project EAGLE in developing and applying the concept of empowerment, including the themes mentioned earlier, the following lessons learned were developed.

Idealism and Practicality Must Be Balanced in a Workable Vision of Empowerment

An overarching insight is that the definition and implementation of empowerment and related high-quality services involve a lengthy and dynamic process related to the development of the entire agency. From the beginning of Project EAGLE, empowerment was envisioned to involve all aspects of families' lives so that they could achieve optimal child development and total family system goals. However, a clear and workable definition of empowerment was formulated only after Project EAGLE had reached a relatively stable phase of organizational functioning. Although Project EAGLE consistently maintained empowerment as an overarching mission, its implementation evolved gradually through the practical experiences of coordinating agency and community services (both tangible and intangible) that promoted what staff came to call families' "interdependent self-sufficiency." Interdependent self-sufficiency means that no one can or should exist in isolation. Everyone's empowerment is reliant on a combination of self-responsibility and mutual support with others in the community, including the social services system. Interdependent self-sufficiency was also understood to include both economic and social aspects.

Staff came to view empowerment as having both process and outcome aspects that encompass family self-sufficiency and optimal early childhood development. In their view, the economic aspect of self-sufficiency is more than simply obtaining a job or getting off welfare, because it does not necessarily indicate the quality of a family's life circumstances. At the very least, it involves adults having employment that offers the possibility of living above the poverty line and may include receiving welfare while working on education and job skill development. The social aspect of self-sufficiency involves building on individual and family strengths through mutual support in community life so that families can achieve overall biopsychosocial well-being for all members. Optimal early childhood development involves promoting parents' skills and knowledge of their children's total developmental needs, their use of information from child development assessments, and their effective involvement with community-based early childhood education services.

Empowerment of Clients Is a Long-Term Process Involving Collaboration with Families

Although the original definition of empowerment included long-term achievements and processes (for example, self-help efforts, identification of family strengths, encouragement of choices, and role modeling), initially it was perceived in terms of events related to the attainment of specific short-range goals and objectives (for example, the number of home visits achieved or activities accomplished). Over time, staff recognized that empowerment was a lifelong and intergenerational process for families for which the agency could only provide a beginning stable foundation. Empowerment became viewed as a collaborative effort in which staff and families engaged in activities and relationships to actualize strengths and mobilize community resources. Although staff had professional expertise, they did not wish to be imposers of service goals; the families' self-knowledge was considered an equally important expertise. Thus, dialogue and mutual decision making between families and staff was crucial to the process of empowerment.

Human Development Is a Necessary Component for Staff for Achievement of Empowerment

Staff concluded that intensive staff-training programs, competitive salaries, and a comprehensive staff development plan are crucial to promote staff competence and to reduce staff turnover. To facilitate family empowerment, staff empowerment is necessary. Staff must experience empowerment from their training and education as well as their practice and relationships within the agency. Moreover, case managers must be willing to learn from families and to value their contributions and expertise. When staff experience efficacy in their jobs, they are better prepared to share their experience and energy with families.

Case Managers Must Respect Families and Be Flexible

The key to building a helpful relationship with families is mutual respect and flexibility in adjusting to the different learning styles and goals of families, even when the case managers are not comfortable with them. Staff must develop the interpersonal skills and professional knowledge to relate to all families well.

Multiple Relationships between Staff and Families Are Important

Although family members often reported that their relationship with the case manager was most important, they also indicated the importance of multiple relationships with other project staff. Developing multiple relationships with various Project EAGLE staff helped families feel connected and welcomed, even if their case manager left the agency. Receiving assurance, direction, and support from the entire agency ensured that families received continuity of care and consistent communication.

Moving Beyond Self-Sufficiency as Independence to Interdependence Is Key Insight

Staff came to recognize that no person or family is literally independent or self-sufficient. Project EAGLE eventually emphasized the significance of interdependence among individuals, families, and society. Contrary to common societal norms of individualism, independence, and competition, interdependent self-sufficiency and empowerment require creative, mutually supportive relationships between people.

Process of Reflection Is Vital to Creative Development of the Organization

Reflection, evaluation, and feedback are critical activities for both families and agency staff. Although such activities may be time consuming and frustrating at times, they are necessary to monitor activity, gain insight into experience, and refine project functioning. Time to reflect on strengths and challenges often resulted in creativity and enthusiasm for all people involved with the project.

Conclusion

This research illustrates that an agency can develop innovative and empowering change efforts that are full family based, comprehensive, and strengths oriented. Indeed, standards for high-quality service and regular evaluation by federal Comprehensive Child Development Program representatives continually challenged and encouraged Project EAGLE toward innovation. Even the tensions and contrasts perceived by staff fueled creative problem solving and agency development. The tensions and polarities inherent in the process of making operational and implementing empowerment programs can be worked out with consistent long-term commitment by an organization. For example, in this study, staff molded the program over time to balance tangible and intangible aspects of services as well as economic and social aspects of family empowerment and education. Project EAGLE contributed to a national dialogue among CCDPs to prevent the program from becoming simply an effort to get clients off welfare regardless of the consequences for them. Within Project EAGLE, most of the contrasts relating to the concept and practice of empowerment were resolved into complementary or encompassing relationships.

This organizational ethnography offers an opportunity to consider how ideas about empowerment in the scholarly literature match what happens in the actual functioning of an agency. The themes pertaining to empowerment and the lessons learned can be considered for relevancy to other settings by practitioners and scholars.

This study suggests that in government-funded agencies, empowerment ideology and activities are likely to fall in between the conservative and radical definitions mentioned in the introduction. Government ideology and service requirements may restrict radical actions, such as directly challenging institutional racism and economic class structures, because the underlying mission is to encourage client economic self-sufficiency and meet basic needs of families, such as child development, rather than macroinstitutional change or social justice. Therefore, change efforts are likely to be incremental and micro- or mesosystem focused. Organizational and community systems can be enhanced by comprehensive services programs, but without major expenditure of resources and mandates to engage in political or community organizing, an agency is unlikely to have a significant effect on institutional patterns of power blocks and resource limitations. Local child and family programs can help clients gain access to resources, but they are not equipped to

generate large-scale system changes (such as building affordable housing or creating a new major source of employment). Whereas the literature emphasizes that helping clients critique oppressive social arrangements is an important ingredient of empowerment, this was not established as a priority for the Comprehensive Child Development Program. In keeping with CCDP mandates, clients were helped to raise awareness of their own circumstances, strengths, resources, and choices and to develop effective problem-solving strategies. This is consistent with the more individualistic aspects of empowerment that are advocated in social work literature. Yet, although individual and family services may be directly beneficial to particular clients, they do not change the institutional socioeconomic and political constraints under which clients live. Helpful or harmful effects on others who are not direct beneficiaries of such empowerment programs were not specified in program goals or research strategies. It is also conceivable that nonbeneficiaries may be disadvantaged in competing with project participants for scarce resources and opportunities. This study did show that project efforts at community change had beneficial effects on many community services. However, the magnitude of the effects across relevant institutions in the broad community is not known. Further study of this magnitude would be helpful for future social policy and program development.

The literature suggests that empowerment of clients requires a parallel process of empowering workers in the human services organization. Application of such an empowerment approach to organizational structure, decision making, and technology contributes to both positive client outcomes and employee job satisfaction and development (Burns, 1994; Gutierrez et al., 1995; Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 1996). Empowerment involves enhancement of workers' feelings of self-efficacy by identifying conditions that foster powerlessness and removing them through organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy-enhancing information (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). The connection between worker empowerment and positive client outcomes may be that when staff feels empowered, the level of commitment and performance increases, contributing to achievement of desired client outcomes. Participant's views support the literature indicating that empowerment is a long-term process that both influences and is transformed by an organization's own evolution (Gutierrez et al., 1995; Kieffer, 1984).

Project EAGLE recognized that creating an empowering organizational culture is important. An essential feature of Project EAGLE was the willingness and capacity of administrators and staff to respond to emerging circumstances with attention to human development goals of both workers and clients and to tailor standardized services to particular circumstances, within limits of federal program regulations. This practice response also was reflected in the case managers' relations with participant families as advocates and mentors, as peers and professionals.

Project EAGLE's experience supported the widely held notion that empowerment is a complex phenomenon (Robbins et al., 1998). Empowerment came to be understood as an overall process of long-term family growth and well-being, with interdependent self-sufficiency as a major outcome. As empowerment became more clearly defined, the need for combining change activities at individual, family, and community levels became apparent. This broader definition of empowerment supports common social work ideas about empowerment-based practice and challenges popular conservative versions of empowerment, such as getting people off welfare (Robbins et al.). It also illustrated that it may be unrealistic to expect local family services agencies to engage in the institutional and community change aspects of empowerment action unless they are given the mandate and resources to do so. The lessons learned from this study stress the importance for a project to clearly define empowerment for its own context and to work continually toward congruence between lofty mission and practical application.

This study shows that empowerment in agency-based practice can be a dynamically developing construct, shaped by daily events, local circumstances, learning over time through experience, and development of intangible and tangible services. When we advocate for careful definition of empowerment, we do not mean that unrealistic or rigid definitions should be imposed on practice. Rather, an agency can creatively engage in a process of understanding and implementing empowerment, ever open to new insights and creative solutions of dilemmas and challenges. This organizational ethnography demonstrated the

importance of qualitative and collaborative long-term research methods for illuminating complex patterns and processes in human services organizations and for revealing lessons for services improvement that are grounded realistically in daily life. Likewise, it indicates that quantitative approaches to program evaluation might benefit from ways of measuring both process and outcome aspects of program development and performance and from convergence with qualitative approaches. ■

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