

EMPOWERMENT – THEORY, HISTORY AND CURRENT SITUATION IN SOCIAL WORK: LITERATURE REVIEW

Ľuboš Kminiak, Zuzana Senáriková, Miloš Candrák, Michal Kozubík

Department of Social Work and Social Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences and Health

Care, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

zsenarikova@ukf.sk, mcandrak@ukf.sk, mkozubik@ukf.sk

Abstract: Empowerment, a multidimensional social process that helps people get control over their lives, has not yet been analysed in literature review studies in the Slovak Republic. The objective of the present study is to provide literature review of foreign professional literature on this concept. We used the literature sources available in the Web of Science (WoS) database. The objective was to quantitatively analyse the papers in the WoS database published from 1992 to 2023. In the defined period, 637 professional papers on “Collective Empowerment in Social Work” were published. Up to 92 papers were linked directly to social work; they were cited 1,175 times in total. Using the methods of narrative literature review and content analysis, we summed up knowledge about empowerment and collective empowerment. Another objective was to depict historical development of the concept. The literature available suggests the need for greater scientific focus on the concept. In the future, it would be beneficial to carry out literature reviews of research papers focusing on the effects of empowerment approach and examples of good practice in various countries.

Keywords: Empowerment. Collective empowerment. Concept history.
Empowerment in practice.

INTRODUCTION

The paper summarises the views of authors of scientific professional articles, mainly of foreign origin, on the concept of empowerment, which has not yet been analysed in literature review studies in the Slovak Republic. It is a fundamental concept that occurs directly in the definitions of social work. The lack of attention paid to the concept may be caused by the inconsistent translation of the English expression *empowerment*. It is translated differently in different cultures and languages. In the Czech literature, for example, an expression *splnomocňující přístup* can be found. In the Slovak literature, both the Slovak equivalent *zmocnenie* or the original English form, *empowerment*, are used.

In addition to individual and collective empowerment, the concept is usually found in literature in relation to economic, political, cultural, and social empowerments. These areas, however, are often intertwined in practice. Economic empowerment seeks to ensure that people acquire adequate skills, abilities, sources, and access to sustainable and safe incomes necessary for their livelihood (Luttrell et al., 2009). Political empowerment relates to groups' abilities to analyse and mobilise, which results in collective work necessary for change. The change includes an attitude towards the status of citizens, claiming their rights, and elimination of generational poverty (Piron, Watkins, 2004). Cultural empowerment is linked with defining norms and rules to recreate culture

and symbolism. Such empowerment may include focusing on minority rights using their culture as a baseline for their empowerment (Luttrell et al., 2009).

Furthermore, Martinez (2022) identifies environmental, gender and digital empowerments. Environmental empowerment focuses on education and empowerment of individuals and communities to participate in environmental protection. Levická (2022) points out the current trends towards reflecting environment in the context of social work and the role of empowerment in it. The aim of gender empowerment is to solve gender inequalities and support gender equality. It includes efforts to challenge traditional gender roles and improve access to education and health care for all the genders. With the increasing importance of technology in the digital world, digital empowerment focuses on providing access to digital resources, digital literacy, and bridging the digital gap.

More attention has been paid to the concept in foreign professional literature. The first hints can be found in the works by Freire (1970). However, empowerment appeared even earlier, in the 1960s, most likely in connection with government anti-poverty programmes (Craig, 2002). Since then, the profession has faced multiple challenges, and the concept has developed. It has always related mainly to oppressed and marginalised populations which call for social change the most.

The Office of Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the Development of Civil Society (2021) has tried to define the concept and refers to empowerment as a process aimed at increasing the abilities to act, make decisions about self, and achieve goals through social and political changes in disadvantaged and marginalised groups. Empowerment is a very complex concept; therefore, it is questionable if the definition provided is sufficient.

Analysing the professional literature, we also encountered an opinion that the exact definition of empowerment contradicts the context of empowerment itself and that empowerment can only be defined in the context of specific cases. Page and Czuba (1999), however, agree that collective empowerment is a multidimensional social process that helps people gain control over their lives.

In general, there is an opinion in professional literature that individual change is necessary for community and social change and community empowerment. Individual change becomes a bridge towards community connectedness and social change. To bring about change, change must first happen at the individual level, so that individuals can become partners in solving complex problems they face as individuals. This opinion is given also by Mayo (2000).

According to Payne and Reith-Hall (2019), social workers also need to focus on a process of change and point out the misconception that collective empowerment may sometimes be imposed as a basic building block for structural changes. Collective empowerment is a broad and very compelling positive concept that affects social work practice. An increase in the number of clients in the involvement in movements for the defence of their rights owes a lot to the ideas of empowerment. Empowerment has developed as an overarching and conceptually coherent concept for the performance of practice. It is present in many methods, from cognitive behavioural therapy to crisis intervention. The principle of empowerment has become one of the key concepts of several social work theories, especially anti-oppressive approaches, feminist theories, and ecosocial approaches (Mátel, 2017). Adams (2008) states that empowerment has different meanings in different areas. It is a dynamic concept that develops and changes according to the experiences of individuals implementing it in practice.

Practical application of acquired knowledge is always a difficult task. Due to various definitions of the concept, it is problematic to define effects empowerment has in practice. In foreign literature, there are several studies (Sjöberg et al., 2015; Li-yu Song (In Payne, Reith-Hall, 2019); Mørck, 2011; Hardina, 2006), or descriptions of practical experiences with introducing the concept of

empowerment in practice and its consequences. In general, however, the studies focus more on empowerment outcomes than on the process of empowerment itself.

The objective of the present study is to perform quantitative analysis of sources available in the Web of Science database on the said issue in the context of social work. The second objective is to introduce a theoretical framework of empowerment and its collective form. The third objective is to depict the historical development of empowerment.

METHODS

Considering the objective of the present study, we decided to use a method of content analysis that focuses on interpretation, extraction, categorisation, and further analysis of concepts (Steinerová, 2015). Furthermore, we used a method of a narrative literature review. It is used to identify information that has already been published on the issue, and to present an overview of opinions, theories, and experiences to offer a comprehensive picture on the concepts of empowerment and collective empowerment and their history in social work.

Sample

To meet the objectives, we used the Web of Science Internet database to search for professional literature from October 2021 to March 2022. The Web of Science is an online academic platform that has provided access to more than 10,000 professional journals, including science, social sciences, humanities, and arts supporting 256 disciplines since 1990 (Web of Science, 2023).

Data collection

The first objective was quantitative analysis of publications on collective empowerment in social work in the Web of Science. The database offers search for documents in multiple databases, such as Web of Science Core Collection, Current Contents Connect, and others.

We searched for scientific publications using the keywords empowerment, collective empowerment, and empowerment history (in English version). Then we found and analysed primary sources of the found publications.

Analysis and processing

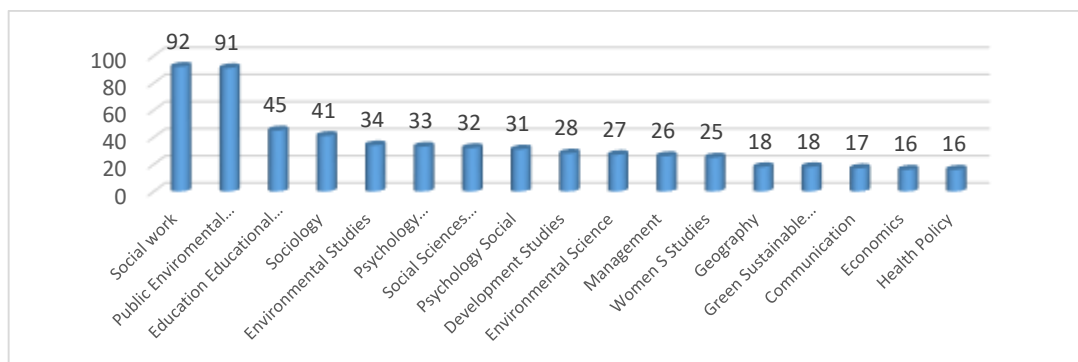
Besides the said keywords, we searched for the phrase “collective empowerment in social work” in all the databases and collections. We focused on categories, year of publication, country of publication, and number of citations of the publications. The analysis results are shown in the graphs below and valid as of 1.12.2023.

RESULTS

The findings are presented in three parts. The first part analyses publications on collective empowerment in social work in the Web of Science database. The second part focuses on summing up the findings on empowerment and collective empowerment. The third part includes the overview of the historical development of empowerment.

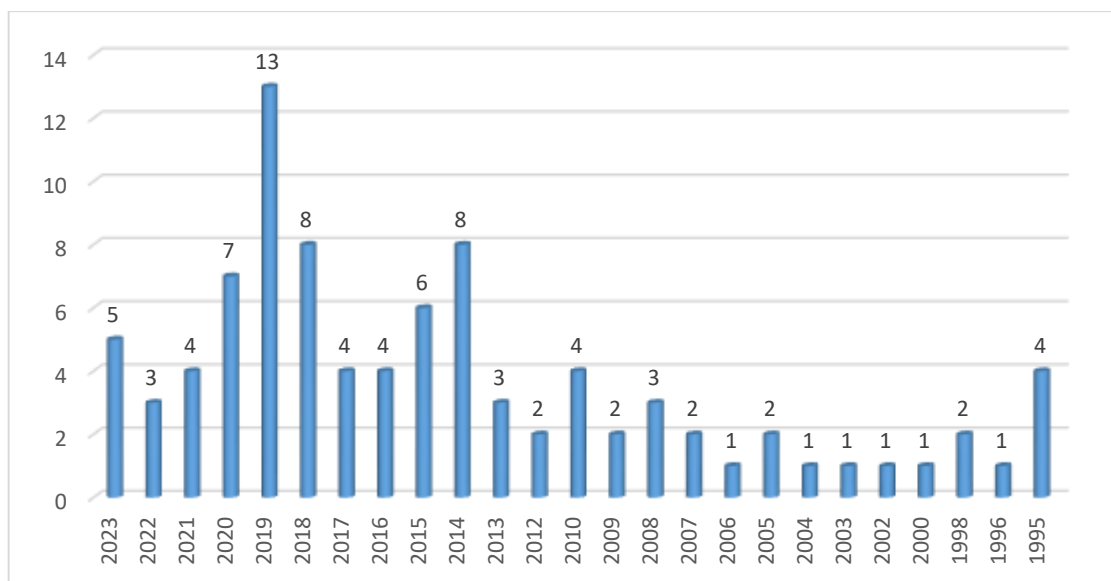
Search results in the Web of Science Internet database

The first objective was to perform quantitative analysis of publications on collective empowerment. We analysed the phrase “*collective empowerment in social work*” in the Web of Science Internet database. The results were valid as of 1.12.2023. The search findings included 637 results published from 1992 to 2023. Graph 1 shows the areas with the highest frequency of publications.



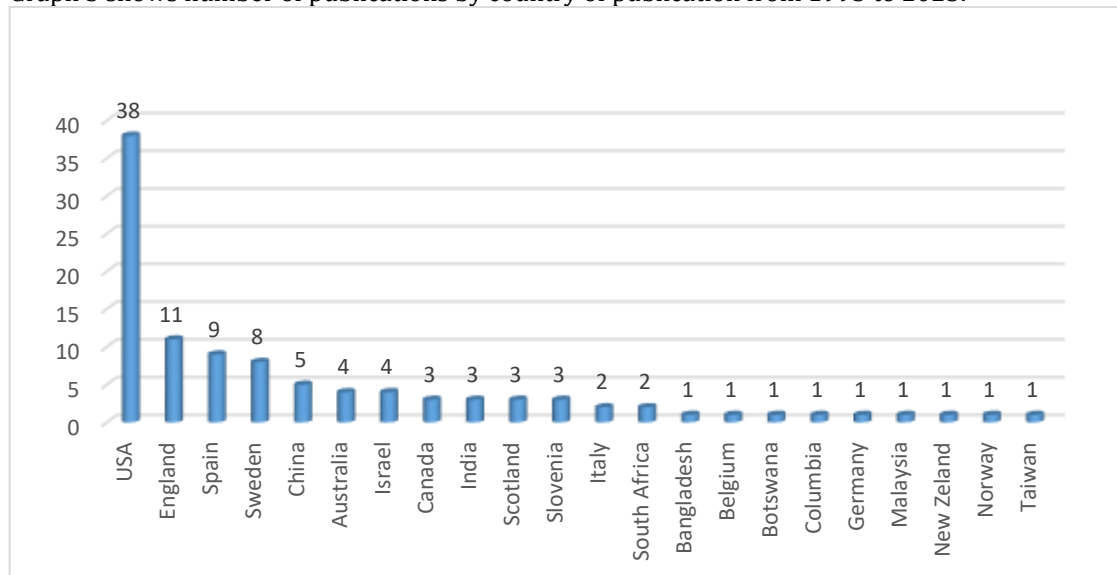
Graph 1 Number of publications by categories (Source: Web of Science, 2023)

The search results included in the category “Social Work” were the most frequent and made up approximately 14.44 % of all the results. Graph 2 shows the number of publications by year of publication. It also shows that the results of the searched concept in social work were published from 1995 to 2023. Most of the publications (13) were published in 2019.



Graph 2 Number of publications by year of publication (Source: Web of Science, 2023)

Graph 3 shows number of publications by country of publication from 1995 to 2023.



Graph 3 Number of publications by country of publication (Source: Web of Science, 2023)

Graph 3 shows that most publications (38) were in the USA. England follows, by a relatively large margin, with 11 publications. The Web of Science database offered the result analysis according to which 90 results were articles, two were review studies, one was a chapter in a book, and one was the proceedings. According to the citation analysis offered by the database, 92 publications were cited up to 1,175 times.

Empowerment and collective empowerment

Empowerment is a process that promotes persons' determination to make use of their potential in their personal, community and social lives by addressing the issues they consider important (Page, Czuba, 1999).

In Slovak literature, the concept of empowerment is used to label:

- A process of changing power relationships using collective action,
- A process of collective awareness of social injustice, and
- Community and individuals' ability to demand change. Changes may occur at the levels of individuals and families, communities, or even entire political community in various areas (political, social, economic, or legal) (Úrad splnomocnenca vlády SR, 2021).

According to Dalrymple and Burke (1995), a shift from pathologizing individuals to increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power is one of the benefits of the concept of empowerment. Payne and Reith-Hall (2019) perceive empowerment as an intellectual and chaotic concept. According to them, it is a controversial concept of social transformation and change in the relationship between the rich and the poor. On the other hand, discussions about the concept of empowerment also focus on psychology of personality change. According to them, the concept may be used to interconnect socially excluded persons and oppression within the analysis of global socioeconomic development and a broader socioeconomic structure. Through empowerment, clients gain the power to make decisions about their lives and act in the three main ways:

- Eliminating social and personal barriers,
- Increasing persons' abilities and self-confidence, and
- Shifting power to the powerless.

Page and Czuba (1999) support this opinion. However, they ask a question that results from various definitions: Is empowerment a theory, a process, or something even broader that connects these two? According to them, a process of empowerment may be compared to a road that develops and widens. Martinez (2022) states that social workers implementing empowerment theory use a five-step framework:

- Problem identification,
- Defining strengths,
- Setting goals,
- Intervention implementation, and
- Evaluation.

Lee (In Page, Czuba, 1999) suggests that empowerment is neither a theory, nor a process, but rather a diversity of conceptually coherent approaches and practice-based social work. Craig (2002) defines empowerment as the creation of sustainable structures, processes, and mechanisms, over which local communities have an increased level of control and through which they have a measurable impact on the public, social and political spheres. Eyben et al. (2008) support this opinion and perceive empowerment as taking steps to change society so that a community has its own place in it which is respected and recognised by the society and lives in it according to the conditions it wants and not the conditions dictated by others.

The concept of empowerment in social work assumes that clients themselves know their situation best, and that people, even in situations of powerlessness, have the potential to change their situation. Within this spirit, empowerment in social work practice is based on nondirective reflective approaches in which the therapeutic relationship and the process of change develop through constant collaboration between the social worker and the client instead of directive dictation of orders by the social worker based on external knowledge. In the empowerment process the role of social workers is to support clients, but the process of collective empowerment itself is an autonomous process of the community (Boehm, Boehm, 2015).

Staples (1990) argues that exclusive attention on individuals or groups is insufficient. Although individual empowerment is a prerequisite for leading a group, it is not sufficient to ensure effective development of collective empowerment.

Stanton (1990) states that empowerment of social workers is necessary for empowerment of clients. He supports his statements by the study in legal and counselling centres and shelters. Šarišská and Balogová (2018) believe that supervision is one of many possibilities how to empower social workers in relation to professional or personal existence.

Furthermore, the empowerment-based approach uses the concept of social development, with the empowerment of self-awareness based on knowledge and the empowerment of group processes and offers communities knowledge and understanding of the method known as action-reflection-action. It is the most appropriate paradigm for international social work practice because this framework specifies the elements necessary for working with poor and oppressed groups worldwide (Lee, 2001).

History of empowerment

The origin of the concept of empowerment is attributed to the feminist theory and education of the marginalised that emphasised personal and internal dimensions of the power in individuals

and communities. With his work, Paolo Freire (1947) has influenced the development of empowerment significantly. He introduced the concept of popular education in the 1960s. In his work he focuses on the oppression of citizens by colonizers in education. According to him, for the oppressed to regain their identity, they must identify the oppressors and collaborate in the search for liberation. The next step is to understand what the oppressors' goal is (Freire, 1970).

According to Craig (2002), the concept of empowerment, most likely, has its roots in government anti-poverty programmes implemented in the 1960s. The concept of empowerment, however, appeared in the professional literature only in the mid-1970s in the attempts to involve citizens in the management of social services, referred to as citizen participation. References directly to the concept of empowerment in the provision of services to the members of marginalised groups began to appear in professional literature in social work and social psychology in the 1970s and 1980s.

Since 1980 the concept of empowerment has gained greater awareness and attention, mostly in the developing countries (Luttrell et al., 2009).

Gradual democratisation and development of pedagogy that educated the poorest inhabitants occurred in Latin America in 1990. Empowerment became a central tool of social movements to develop politics and economy in Latin American countries (Van Dam et al., 1992). Some feared that over-enthusiasm for empowerment adopted by non-governmental organisations supporting social movements would have negative effects on the consolidation of democratic institutions capable of building consensus. The view of empowerment in French literature was equally critical. Hardina (2006) states that the concept of empowerment began to apply to the field of management in the 1990s. The goal of the empowerment strategy was to increase involvement of employees in organisational decision making. The empowerment approach in this sphere was considered as a good tool for improving service quality, increasing workforce productivity, stimulating innovations, and improving interpersonal relationships between employees and superiors.

DISCUSSION

The objective of the present study was to quantitatively analyse the sources available in the Web of Science database, introduce the concepts of empowerment and collective empowerment, and briefly describe their history. According to Turner and Maschi (2015), the development of social workers' professional identity and identification with the profession of social work relates closely to empowerment theory. The empowerment theory emphasises the development of individual and collective identities in the context of social and gender inequalities and discriminations. We agree that individual change is necessary for collective change. We cannot expect clients to demand a change on a collective level unless there is a change in understanding on an individual level.

Collective empowerment is an ability of communities to act and, thus, transform self-perceptions. Linked to justice, and social and economic values, it should be consistent with individual empowerment. We agree with Rappaport (1984), who states that it is easy to define absence of empowerment, but it is difficult to define it in action, as it takes different forms in different persons and in different contexts. We believe that collective empowerment in social work has the potential. It can be used to link socially excluded persons and oppression in the analysis of global socioeconomic development and a broader socioeconomic structure. Even if it is not possible to give its precise definition, we believe it is necessary for social workers to understand the context of collective empowerment. Only if they can describe it and find the signs of collective empowerment in practice, can they help their clients effectively. We are convinced that collective

empowerment has the potential to solve many social issues of marginalised communities in Slovakia.

Sjöberg et al. (2015) carried out a comparative study of community work in two different worlds – in Mumbai and Stockholm. The authors found out that there were conditions for collective empowerment in both areas; however, differences were in empowerment strategies. In Stockholm, the focus was on individual empowerment, but specific strategies and practices for community empowerment were lacking. In Mumbai, on the other hand, organising marginalised groups for collective empowerment to achieve social change was crucial. Payne and Reith-Hall (2019) discuss positive effects of empowerment in the areas of support and prevention. They were also stated by Li-yu Song (In Payne, Reith-Hall, 2019), who studied the impact of empowerment strategies on protection of victims of intimate partner abuse in Taiwan. She found out that, given that most victims stayed with the perpetrators of violence, the most effective was the empowerment strategy that prevented reoccurrence of violence by ensuring victims' own safety through their better decision making.

Positive effects of empowerment were also observed in empowering Roma minority groups in Serbia and Montenegro with the aim integrating them evenly in the official education system while preserving their identity and cultural heritage. Furthermore, in Black Power movement in the USA, such effects were manifested in empowering racially segregated African Americans in political and social spheres.

The study on empowerment in a socially and ethnically diverse community in Copenhagen is another notable source that contributes to the topic of collective empowerment (Mørck, 2011). The author examined social workers' activities in marginalised groups for several years. According to him, most studies on empowerment focus on empowerment outcomes and only few on empowerment processes. We agree that for social work practice, it is more beneficial to focus on processes of how empowerment occurs and not merely on its final outcomes.

Positive effects of collective empowerment were reported in southern Asia where women's self-help groups have come to the fore in the previous three decades. The study provides evidence of positive effects on economic and political collective empowerment of women, women's control over family planning, although no evidence of positive effects on psychological empowerment was found (Kumar et l., 2021).

Successful implementation of community empowerment in Slovakia has been perceived mainly in marginalised groups and has resulted in a decrease in their feeling of alienation from the majority society. However, projects to promote empowered participation are rarely successful if they are terminated prematurely. It is caused by time-consuming processes to create structures and mechanisms that lead to empowerment of communities (Úrad splnomocnenca vlády SR..., 2021).

Limitations and strengths

As the issue of empowerment is rather broad, it is difficult to examine all the sources available. In the literature review, the conclusions may be distorted due to the possible unintentional omission of parts of literature or failure to challenge the validity of the statements. We perceive the paper itself to be one of the strengths – the summary of the views and knowledge on empowerment and collective empowerment, which have not been published in our literature before. Analysing various research studies, the paper may be an incentive to carry out similar studies in our conditions.

Recommendations

The concept of empowerment represents the potential to help various socially excluded groups of population. Considering the results of the foreign studies proving positive effects of

empowerment, we recommend that social workers use the concept in their practice when working with disadvantaged groups (marginalised communities, disabled individuals, refugees, adolescents, or single mothers). Furthermore, we believe it is important to create self-help groups. Analysing the literature sources and analysing Web of Science quantitatively, we found out that only little attention has been paid to individual and collective empowerments in both national and foreign literature. We believe that in social work it certainly has the potential and offers the clients the possibility to change social relationships and escape oppression. To bring social change, it is necessary for clients to gain control over their lives. If social workers understand the context of collective empowerment, they can help their clients. We recommend that more attention is paid to collective empowerment in education of future social workers. Furthermore, it is necessary to organize further education about effective strategies and procedures in the process of empowerment for social workers who already work directly with clients. To achieve this goal, it is necessary for students to have access to relevant sources and studies. Our country also needs to start working in this field of scientific research. The results of the studies focused on perceptions of empowerment, its process, use of methods, and identification of effects of empowerment in clients, or collective empowerment in communities may lead to valuable sources for education, or examples of good practice that can inspire social workers in their practice. Examples of good practice may be supported by overviews of ongoing and completed projects promoting empowerment and their implementation, and analysis of the methods and techniques that were used when working with individuals, groups, and communities.

Conclusions

Multiple studies describing practical experiences with introducing the concept of empowerment in practice followed by its positive effects support our statement that empowerment has the potential in social work. It is necessary to focus on it in the areas of theory, research, education, and working with clients.

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