Empowering the People: 'Empowerment' and the British Journal of Social Work 1971-1999

Abstract

This paper offers a historical and contextual discussion of the concept of empowerment, a term that proliferates in contemporary social work and social policy discourse. The first half of the paper discusses the rise of 'empowerment' within social policy and social work highlighting some of the factors that have led to it becoming embedded within such circles, and discussing the justifications and criticisms of both the term and the interventions that can result from it. The second half takes a more specific look at the way in which 'empowerment' was discussed and debated within the pages of the *British Journal of Social Work* from the journal's inception in 1971 through to the end of 1999.

This charting of empowerment in its wider social and historical context not only informs us of the rise and meaning of a key term within the social policy and social work lexicon, it also alerts us to the need to view 'empowerment' not as a fixed *a priori* good, but as embedded within social and political relationship, and therefore as a concept that can be used for either progressive or regressive social policies and social work practices.

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Introduction

'Empowerment is a term that is in widespread use today. It has been embraced by the political establishment and proliferates in social work and social policy circles. The 'empowerment of users and carers' was one rationale given for the changes to service delivery brought about by the 1990 NHS and Community Care Act (DH/SSI, 1991, p. 7). It became an increasingly popular term with the New Labour government during its time in power, with one government publication, which contains a foreword by the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown and an introduction by then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Hazel Blears, mentioning empowerment thirty-six times (CLG, 2008). Stella Creasy, a current Labour MP, stated in a newspaper interview that she sees her role as one of empowering her constituents (Aitkenhead, 2012), whilst the current Prime Minister David Cameron sees empowering people as being 'a natural part of a Conservative approach to government (Conservatives, 2009, online).

However, despite its current ubiquity the actual term 'empowerment' is a relatively recent addition to contemporary social policy discourse. For example, it was 1986 before it appeared in a peer-reviewed article in either *Critical Social Policy* (Beuret and Stoker, 1986) or the *British Journal of Social Work* (Ryan, 1986). It would be another three years before

another BJSW article mentions it (Dominelli, 1989). An archive search of the term I conducted on April 26 2012 showed that from its inception in 1971 through to the end of the 1980s, the BJSW had only two original articles mentioning empowerment. It was not until 1993 that 'empowerment' appeared in an abstract (Coulshed, 1993), and 1994 before it appeared in the actual title of an article (Connolly, 1994).

It was the 1990s that saw the idea of empowerment become more and more embedded within social policy and political circles in the United Kingdom (UK), to the extent that it is now often used in a rhetorical fashion in such a way that it is held to be a self-evident good, with little elaboration needed on the specific meaning of the term. It is now so taken for granted that one book reviewer was critical of the authors for not explicitly referring to it (Lucas, 2006).

In this paper I give a brief general overview of empowerment as it has been presented within both social policy and social work circles, noting the roots of the term and some of the factors that have contributed to its widespread adoption. The second part of the paper takes a more specific look at the rise and meaning of the term within the *British Journal of Social Work* from its inception in 1971 until the end of the 1990s. This is due to this being the period that saw empowerment become embedded within UK discourse. Developments in the twenty-first century are important and will be the subject of a future article; for now though it is important to document the initial rise to prominence of the concept of empowerment. My purpose is to provide a chronicle of how wider societal

dynamics were being reflected and refracted within what is arguably the UK's most prestigious social work journal.

The rise and meaning(s) of empowerment

According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language the word 'empower' can be traced back to at least the mid-17th century when it had the legalistic meaning 'to invest with authority, authorize' and that it also developed to mean 'to enable or permit' (quoted in the Free Dictionary, online). However, its more contemporary usage is rooted in the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the women's and black liberation groups, most notably in the United States of America (USA), although it is important to note that it is a term that has also been utilised by neoconservatives, for example in the development of 'empowerment zones' which in reality were about the privatisation of public services (Cruikshank, 1999). Cruikshank argues that whilst there is a clear difference between those on the political left and right in intention behind the rhetoric of empowerment, for the former it is to generate political resistance, for the latter to produce economic and entrepreneurial actors, both share the same political strategy which is a desire 'to act upon others by getting them to act in their own interest' (p.68).

Whilst empowerment began to be discussed in the UK during the 1970s this was often in reference to developments in the USA. It is interesting to note that in Lukes' (2005[1974]) classic discussion of power the term empowerment does not appear in the index. As mentioned above, from its inception in 1971 through to the end of the 1980s, the BJSW had only two

articles mentioning empowerment. However, there were a couple of references to the term in book reviews prior to 1986, in relation to black and community empowerment respectively, which illustrates the way in which social work invariably is influenced by political developments that are happening outside the profession.

One of the earliest attempts at defining empowerment was in relation to social work with black communities in the USA, where Solomon (1976) defined it as 'a process whereby persons who belong to a stigmatized social category throughout their lives can be assisted to develop and increase skills in the exercise of interpersonal influence and performance of valued social roles' (p. 6). Later definitions broadened the recipients of the empowerment process. So, for Wallerstein (1992) it is

> a social-action process that promotes participation of people, organisations and communities towards the goal of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life and social justice.
>
> (p.198, quoted in Anderson, 1996, p.70)

Such a wide-ranging definition, divorced from the requirement 'to belong to a stigmatized social category' may be useful but it can also allow people to interpret empowerment in any way they choose, in the process making it more difficult to know with clarity what is being done or attempted in its name. Indeed, in an edited book titled *Pathways to Empowerment*, the editor notes in her introduction that it is not possible

to give a definitive definition of empowerment as it is a term that is still evolving and also one that means different things to different people, therefore all the book's contributors were free to work to their own definition (Parsloe 1996a). However, despite these slight differences in interpretation, at its core empowerment 'involves an increase in the power of users of social services' (ibid. p.xvii).

Clarity of definition has not been achieved in the intervening years. As Adams (2008) notes, empowerment is 'a multifaceted idea, meaning different things to different people' and therefore 'no final, so called "authoritative" definition' is possible (p.4). Nevertheless, he argues that it can be seen as 'the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the processes by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives' (p.17).

In practical terms though, it invariably means authority figures, for example professionals such as social workers, intervening in order to 'empower' people. In this respect Parsloe (1996b) argued that the term could be seen as not a very appropriate word for social work to have adopted, due to 'the very idea that one person, a social worker, can empower another, a client, runs counter to the whole idea of greater equality of power on which the concept supposedly depends' (p.6). However, she is also of the belief that it is a process that, in theory at least, involves an increase in the power of those who use social services.

This is similar to Thompson's (2007) frustration at those who see power as akin to a zero-sum game when the situation is more nuanced than that; power need not be something someone (social worker) *gives* to a client, *power can be generative*, which means professionals can use their power to generate service user power. For Thompson, the basis of empowering practice is therefore to use professional power 'not to coerce or to suppress, but rather to help people move towards taking greater control over their lives' (p.24).

In this respect 'empowerment' can be seen as a relatively benign term, a way of helping people gain increased power to organise their affairs and achieve their goals and desires. Nevertheless, a term that has become so embedded within both policy and practice initiatives has also attracted much criticism over what it represents in both theoretical and practical terms.

Questioning Empowerment

The rise to prominence of the rhetoric of empowerment did not go unnoticed or uncontested. Indeed the term had its critics even as it was first becoming established. By the early 1990s some had noticed how the term had become something of a buzz-word that littered the mission statements of health, welfare and education services (Gomm, 1993). Humphries (1996) noted how its mention directly or by implication had

become '*de rigueur* in articles, books and political statements' and that it had 'become a key objective in the training of professionals of all kinds, particularly the caring professions' (p.1). Such a situation led Humphries to ponder why the discourse of empowerment had become so dominant at this historical moment. She highlights the political struggles of the 1980s and the rise and fall of bureaucratic and proceduralist strategies to combat inequality which differed from the more radical perspectives. The latter was more concerned with empowerment as being something that emerged through individual and collective action, the former involving a more top-down approach to the alleviation of individual and societal problems.

In addition, the 'political correctness' debate (Philpot, 1999) and rise of competency based training (Dominelli, 1996) were used to sideline social work's more radical agenda. Operating in a political climate in which ideology was seen as discredited and working class collective power was waning, the scope for critiques of structural oppression and collective political action was limited. These changes helped create a space for the terminology of empowerment to grow unencumbered by the baggage of 'misguided' past political ideologies or practices.

The wider political context and the way that empowerment can mean different things to different people can be illustrated in relation to sexuality and gender. For some it manifested as demands for women to gain control over their own bodies in relation to such things as sexual self-

definition and control over their own fertility, for others more emphasis was placed on sexual pleasure and freedom, whilst for lesbian and gay activists empowerment meant the right to be visible and to be treated equally in society (Carabine, 1996). Nevertheless, one key shared aim was on women empowering themselves (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 1993).

Similarly, Langan (2002) points out that during the 1970s radical activists had a commitment to the 'self-activity' of the working class. In such a climate of collective working class action the notion of philanthropy implied by the bestowal of power by professionals on the working class was not particularly resonant; the belief was that members of the working class were capable of organising themselves, of gaining power from below by virtue of their collective strength, not having it sprinkled onto them from above like confetti. In this respect,

> the rise of the concept of empowerment and its institutionalisation within social work theory and practice is reflective of both the decline of working class collective power and the changing conception of 'empowerment'; from something to be taken, by force if necessary, to something to be handed down by the state, here in the guise of the social worker.

> (author, forthcoming).

This did not preclude people aligning themselves with oppressed and disadvantaged groups. It was not about non-engagement but about joining together to achieve mutually desirable goals, perhaps best

summed up by the following quote attributed to an Aborigine women: 'If you are here to help me then you are wasting your time. But if your liberation is tied up with mine, then let us begin' (quoted in Anderson, 1996, p.69).

Such suspicion of 'benevolent' help is justified, as far from being a benign term empowerment can actually be a vehicle for far from progressive social policies and practical implementation. For Rees 'the word "empowerment" has been and is being used as a term of convenience, to justify the maintenance of disempowering policies and practices rather than to their elimination'. In addition, this relatively new concept 'is being substituted for old ones without the political nature of empowerment being developed' (quoted in Wai Man, 1996, p.45). In other words, at a time when previous political movements around such things as race and gender were receding there was more of a focus on the individual whereby 'empowerment' became the goal but one that lacked substance or political analysis. In this sense it represents a depoliticising of action for change, a wider political outlook being replaced with a more individualistic casework notion of empowerment (Humphries, 1996).

The contemporary notion of empowerment as a process that allows service users to have more control over their lives can also prove illusory, on the contrary it can be a mechanism for drawing people into participating in processes and decisions over which they have little meaningful control. As Langan (2002) notes,

Parents are said to be empowered by being invited to attend child protection case conferences; they thus become complicit in measures of state intervention in their family life decided on by professionals and the police. Applicants for community care are empowered by the fact that their designated social worker is also the manager of a devolved budget which is limited by criteria quite independent of the applicant's needs. Too often, empowerment means reconciling people to being powerless.

(p.215)

To this we could add the way in which psychiatric patients are 'empowered' by being encouraged to contribute to their care plan, but with the introduction of the Mental Health Act 2007 their power to refuse prescribed medication post-discharge is often not up for discussion. In other words, the power that is given is bound within certain parameters, and these can lead to a lowering of expectations as well as being predicated on the client ultimately being submissive to those who, in reality, wield power.

If the empowerment process can undermine individual autonomy there are also those who are wary of its relationship to a form of individualism which they associate with political conservatism and self-help, as opposed to equality and liberatory based group politics around such things as anti-racism, feminism and class. However, as Adams (2008) points out, the more radical approaches also emphasised self-help, for example radical

psychiatric activists emphasised action to free themselves and not to rely on therapists or social workers.

The notion of empowerment entails a relationship between someone who is held to be relatively powerless in a given context compared to another person who is seen to be able to help them to gain some degree of power over whatever aspect of their live is presented as a problem. In this sense it is not something done to the person, rather they are said to be enabled to empower themselves (Thompson, 2007). However, as we have seen , empowerment can involve both liberatory and regulatory measures as it becomes incorporated into professional discourse and can be used to justify professionals' positions and their preferred method of intervention (Baistow, 1995).

The discussion above has briefly highlighted the rise, justifications for and criticisms of the concept of empowerment. In what follows I wish to illustrate how the term was discussed within the pages of the BJSW during the 1980s and 1990s, specifically in original peer-reviewed articles, although I do refer to book reviews occasionally. My interest is in describing and highlighting the way in which external developments began to permeate social work discourse and, in turn, how social work moulded them for its own purposes.

The BJSW and Empowerment: 1971 -1989

The BJSW was first published in 1971. However, it was not until the ninth edition in 1979, in a review of the book *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities'* by Barbara Bryant Solomon that the word 'empowerment' appears for the first time anywhere within its pages (Cheetham, 1979). In 1985, in another book review 'community empowerment' is mentioned as a possible strategy in working with people, again illustrated by examples from the USA (Service, 1985). The following year another book review notes the definition of empowerment given as being not only a commitment to 'giving the client a sense of dignity and access to basic goods and services, equal opportunity and participation' but also to social change directed towards these aims (quoted in Wilkes, 1986, p.697).

It was in a supplementary edition of the 1986 volume that the first article appeared that specifically mentioned empowerment. The article looked at interventions with young mothers who were experiencing depression, and recognised the role of wider support networks in its alleviation. Such 'community empowerment' is seen as being a strategy 'to decrease the sense of apathy and helplessness of the user group by maximizing the probability that initiatives taken by the families, however small, met with successful outcomes', and 'It implies giving families a real say in how resources are both allocated and spent' (Ryan,1986, p.79).

A 1987 book review, again concerned with the USA, notes the authors' mention of 'political empowerment' as being a wholly client-centred

approach (Rossetti, 1987). The following year, another book review notes that the issue of 'community empowerment' is not one that has been much pursued in the UK (Cooper, 1988).

The first and only detailed discussion of the concept of empowerment during the first two decades of the BJSW's existence appears in 1989 in an article on incest abuse and power relationships from a feminist perspective. Feminist empowerment in this context is said to consist of four major thrusts:

> The first concentrates on providing women and children with individual support…. The second thrust concentrates on enabling abused girls and women to come together in groups where they can work collectively on the feelings of isolation, powerlessness and guilt that mark their state whilst abuse is being perpetrated on them…. the third thrust is aimed at getting groups of abused women to acknowledge the social divisions which exist between them, especially those of age, sexual orientation, and race, and examine the differences these divisions make to their experience of incest. The fourth thrust challenges the punitive treatment incest victims/ survivors are subjected to once investigations for criminal proceedings against their assailants are initiated.
>
> (Dominelli, 1989, p.302)

Despite Dominelli's intervention it is clear that empowerment was a rarely discussed concept within the BJSW during this period.

The BJSW and Empowerment: 1990 -1994

As noted above, the 1990s saw empowerment come of age in wider political and social discourse, and although this is reflected to an extent in the BJSW detailed discussion was mainly to be found in books and other print formats. For example, whilst 1990 saw the term mentioned in two articles (Fielden, 1990; Braye and Preston-Shoot, 1990) there was no definition given or discussion around it. The following year, in an article concerned with the professionalization of social work and the setting up of a general council, Hugman (1991) sees a stark choice for social workers 'between the opportunity for empowering the profession in its current path of professionalization on the one hand and using social work for the joint empowerment of professionals and service users on the other' (p.213). Hugman would prefer to see collective service user representation on any such professional organisation. This conception of the joint empowerment of both professionals and service users reflects Thompson's later point noted above that empowerment can be a generative process and not a zero-sum game. Such a process is cited by Hardaker et al. (1991) as part of the mediation model of social work. However, the reality is that power sits mostly with professionals who, by sharing their power, are said to empower their clients. Reference is also made to the wider political usage of 'empowerment', with Biehal and

Sainsbury (1991) seeing it as a term more associated with the Left and notions of positive liberty.

The early 1990s also saw empowerment being discussed in relation to more distinct groups. It is said to be about 'consumer choice' (Hatfield et al. 1992) and an essential component of both challenging and extending the normalization process in relation to community care and user and carer participation (Smith and Brown, 1992; Hughes, 1993). The need for 'student empowerment' is also highlighted (e.g. de Maria, 1992) with the values of empowerment said to underpin self-directed learning (Taylor, 1993). According to Coulshed (1993) it was a requirement of the then new Diploma in Social Work that social work education fosters empowerment. Interestingly, the word itself is not mentioned in the 1996 second revision of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work's (CCETSW) *Rules and Requirements for the Diploma in Social Work* (CCETSW, 1996), although a review carried out in 1998 of the DipSW and CCETSW states that 'it is important that the DipSW promotes empowerment' (JM Consulting, 1998, p.14). There is even an acknowledged need for 'a new doctrine of empowerment' (Smith and Brown, 1992, p.686), although as we reach the end of 1992 we have still not had any substantial discussion in the BJSW of what the old doctrine was.

The following year saw the first article to have the word empowerment in the title (Connolly, 1994). The article is about 'family decision making'

legislation and practice in New Zealand. However, whist it appears in the title the only other reference to it is contained in the summary/introduction which claims that the process aims to tackle family *disempowerment*. Empowerment then is an attempt to address disempowerment, but still there is no specific discussion or clarification as to what such terms actually mean. For Boushell (1994) the focus on empowerment was very fragmented in nature despite 'recent theoretical developments in antidiscrimination and user *empowerment'* (p.188, my emphasis). This is the only time the word appears in the article, however, its positioning further informs us that the issue of empowerment was 'out there', being discussed in social, political and academic circles.

This is partially addressed later in 1994 when there is more of an attempt to offer a definition or explanation of what empowerment entails, even if, as in the following two citations the actual word empowerment only appears once in each article. Howe (1994) sees the growth of a concern with participation and empowerment as taking place within a wider framework of postmodern scepticism towards truth and a neo-conservative focus on freedom and the individual, whilst for Cnaan (1994) 'empowerment is more than the legal right to perform certain functions; it is a process that educates and helps clients to make independent decisions and care for themselves (p.542). For Caddick (1994) empowerment is about giving offenders 'marketable skills on top of relevant life experiences' (p.449), whilst Raynor and Vanstone (1994) view it as belonging to a help based model of social care intervention.

We are now beginning to get more elaboration on what empowerment actually means, nevertheless, it is still the case that to date, no article contributors to the BJSW have felt the need to give a detailed explanation of the term or indeed competing or critical explanations.

The BJSW and Empowerment: 1995 -1999

It was in the second half of the 1990s that the concept of empowerment began to be more widely mentioned and critically evaluated within original articles. Its growing popularity not only in Western Europe but in Eastern Europe was noted by Ramon (1995), who argues that Friere's (1972) notion of empowerment through education gained popularity in Slovenia and other East European states following the collapse of the communist regime. The influence of critical theory and Habermaisan communicative strategies was also held to be a contextual factor in the rise of the discourse of empowerment (Blaug, 1995). This is further evidence that the theme of empowerment was gaining in relevance both within and outwith the academy, and that social work is not only greatly influenced by wider social and political developments but does, albeit to a lesser degree, adapt and reflect back to society aspects of these modifications.

 The value of education and Habermasian communicative ideals is evident within much of the discussions over how best to achieve this holy grail of 'empowerment'. Corby et al. (1996) note that 'the emphasis on

partnership and empowerment raises false expectations in many parents' raising many ethical considerations and that far from 'achieving the goal of engaging parents and helping them to care better for their children, it could alienate them and make them apathetic'(p.489). For Calder (1995), empowerment had become a trendy notion that can operate as a form of social control and that therefore its image of equality and openness is misleading, since the distribution of power is clearly unequal. Meanwhile, within social work education the move towards a competency model of social work was seen as potentially leading to 'forms of intervention which further disempower users whilst clothing their activities in the rhetoric of citizenship and empowerment' (Dominelli, 1996, p.173). Competency based social work training can be instrumental in nature and lack reflexivity thereby reducing ethical and philosophical debates to one-dimensional 'values'. For Humphries (1997), its 'seductiveness is in the *co-option* of liberal humanist discourse of 'student-centred learning', but this is tied into centrally determined, predefined goals' (p.650, emphasis in original). In addition, the focus of 'empowerment' in relation to only one aspect of a person's life, for example impairment, age or psychiatric diagnosis can miss other issues such as race, class and gender that can contribute to the person's lack of power.

This co-option can be seen in relation to mental health services. As Forbes and Sashidharan (1997) note, many hospital mental health advocacy groups not only contributed unrewarded user energy and labour they also did little to change the environment or provide alternatives for those who

found the existing service set-up unhelpful. It is noted that many psychiatric user-run services had compromised so much in exchange for funding and 'a seat at the table' that they could be hard to distinguish from mainstream mental health services. Similarly, Browne (1996) sees empowerment as about giving a voice to survivors of child abuse and treating survivor organisations as equal contributors to resolving issues arising from the abuse, but is wary that they can have their views subordinated to those of professionals due to the current hierarchical set up of services.

A lack of staff understanding of the concept of empowerment is also highlighted as leading to strategies that actually reinforce staff power rather than empower service users (Bland, 1997; Powell and Lovelock, 1997).Whilst this may indeed be the case it is slightly unfair to castigate staff for lack of definitional clarity as the BJSW itself at that time contained little clarity as to what empowerment entails. However, Bland does try to rectify this, being the first author to give the concept of empowerment some detailed discussion. Drawing on the work of Adams (1990) she notes that

> dictionary definitions of the verb 'to empower' reveal a wide range of meanings including 'to invest legally or formally with power, to authorize or license', 'to impart power to do something', and 'to enable or permit'. As Adams rightly comments, this last definition is less radical but is probably the one which is most often implied in

social work. To 'impart power' to someone implies an actor with power giving up some of that power to another, with freedom to use it as they wish. To 'enable or permit' implies a more restricted relinquishing of power within a framework approved by the donor.

(Bland, 1997, p.588)

For Bland, residents' rights and charters are forms of positive empowerment that have been developed for older people in residential care. Indeed, a variety of strategies for empowerment began to be put forward, such as 'imaginization', a concept that uses 'the conscious manipulation of the images and metaphors which frame behaviour' (Gould and Harris, 1996, p.235). According to Lewis et al. (1997) empowerment is one of a variety of 'instruments for facilitating person-centred resource allocation and decision-making (p.3), although they do note the conflict of interest between user-empowerment and resource allocation. In such circumstances people can be 'empowered' into accepting poor or inadequate service provision as they are drawn into mechanisms of resource prioritisation and allocation. This more sceptical view is echoed by Clark (1998) who views empowerment as a fashionable concept that has become excessively elastic and that has had little useful impact. Thompson et al. (1996) see empowerment as being a useful strategy to alleviate workplace stress. Here we see the tautological nature of 'empowerment'; for some it is the result of a specific strategy or combination of strategies, for others it is itself a strategy. It can be both

cause and effect; in other words, empowerment can cause itself! The use, and potential misuse, of Western notions of empowerment for Africa and African people is also discussed with the dangers of ethnocentrism and missionary zeal being highlighted (Bar-On, 1999; Graham, 1999).

Arguably the most detailed discussion of empowerment is by Lupton (1998) in an article about Family Group Conferences. She notes how the concept contains

both a rights-based and a responsibility-based interpretation of the relationship between the individual and the state. It may not only involve individuals striving for greater power and control over their lives, but may also require those individuals to develop a greater degree of independence and self-reliance.

(p.110)

For her, such objectives are not necessarily contradictory, it being possible that enabling individuals to meet their own needs can enhance their sense of gaining control over their circumstances, of feeling empowered, although she warns of the possible tension if the promotion of self-reliance is primarily concerned with reducing expenditure on state provided services. Rather than embrace or reject empowerment *per se*, 'Ideas or initiatives that claim empowerment as a central objective therefore require careful scrutiny to assess the particular combination of rights and responsibilities by which they are underpinned' (ibid.).

<u>Conclusion</u>

This paper has sought to chart the growing popularity of the concept of empowerment within social policy and social work, with a more specific detailing of its rise in the British Journal of Social Work from 1971-1999. The chosen timeframe allowed us to see the development of empowerment through the pages and history of the journal during the period from the journal's inception to the end of the decade in which empowerment became firmly embedded in social, political and professional discourse. As such it is more of a historically descriptive account rather than a deep theoretical analysis.

However, it should be clear that the discourse of empowerment did not come from nowhere, but rather was influenced by wider social and political change. The meaning of empowerment, whilst never fixed, indeed often used but rarely defined, was subject to change and contestation. Detailing these issues is important if we are to understand the origins of contemporary discursive practices.

It is tempting to think of empowerment as just being a nice contemporary term for activities that have always formed the basis of good social work. As Jackson (1996) puts it, in reference to social work practice in the 1960s, 'Though ,thirty years on, we may call it empowerment, it is still the combination of practical help and the quality of the relationship that enables social workers, sometimes, to help people change their lives for the better'(p.50). Similarly, Parsloe (1996b) argues that whilst

professionals may not give a detailed analysis of what empowerment is, in practice they tend to share the desire 'to assist or encourage clients to develop the confidence, competence and self-esteem' to have a greater say in the provision, planning and creation of the services they want (p.8).

Nevertheless, there is a danger that such a term can be utilised so often that its meaning and application in a given context is taken as an *a priori* good. As has been shown in relation to strategies around 'anti-oppression', feel good rhetoric can be used to hide behind far from progressive policies and practice (e.g. Humphries, 2004). In this respect it is important to not only historicise empowerment, to show its conditions of emergence, but also to look at what is being done in its name in the here and now.

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