The Creative Intermingling of 1960s Liberation Movements and Managerial Empowerment

Hilary Bradbury
Jean Bartunek

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Hilary Bradbury
Case Western Reserve University
Weatherhead School of Management
Department of Organizational Behavior
10900 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44109-7235

216-368-0070
216-368-4785 (fax)
HilaryBrad@aol.com

Jean M. Bartunek
Boston College
Department of Organization Studies
Fulton Hall 430
Chestnut Hill, MA 02167-3808

617-552-0455
617/552-4230 (fax)
bartunek@bc.edu

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ABSTRACT

Approaches to power and empowerment in management thought have typically focused on power from an individual perspective with empowerment as the delegation of power to others. In contrast, the liberation movements in the U.S. in the late 1960s and early 1970s took a structural approach towards power, and emphasized the importance of certain large social groupings claiming power for themselves. It is through these liberation movements that notions of empowerment migrated into management thought in the 1980s.

In this paper we will address the links between individual and structural approaches to empowerment from an historical perspective. We explore some shifts in meanings of power and empowerment, taking the 60s liberation movements as a specific historical context for understanding their intermingling. We use the differences in approach between liberation movements and management to suggest expanded potentials for understanding what empowerment might mean in organizational settings.
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In the organizational sciences, both theorists and practitioners (Handy, 1994; Kanter, 1989; Senge, 1990; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990) have dubbed empowerment one of the most important issues of the 1990's. In critically informed disciplines such as feminist informed psychology and social theory, the term appears as the de facto central ethical imperative (Smith & Douglas, 1990). It clearly represents a very important construct.

The root of empowerment is power, even though this is not always recognized (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). There are links between the two constructs that have not often been adequately acknowledged. In this paper we will address these links from an historical perspective. In particular we explore some shifts in meanings of power and empowerment within the specific historical context of the movements of liberation of the 1960s. We will suggest a category scheme that helps clarify important distinctions within meanings of power and empowerment, and use it to explore possible new ways of linking these constructs.

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF POWER AND EMPOWERMENT

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the terms power and empowerment are linked at least as far back as the mid 17th century, that is, prior to the democratic revolutions in France or the U.S. There two meanings were applied to the word empowerment, “to invest legally or formally with power or authority” and “to impart or bestow power to an end or for a purpose.” In Samuel Johnson's dictionary (1755), the term “empower” had two complementary definitions similar to those in the Oxford English Dictionary: “to authorize,” and “to give natural force.” In both dictionaries the term “empower” was defined as a simple cognate of the term power.

Two other characteristics of these early definitions of empowerment are noteworthy. In both definitions the term “empower” clearly implies that power is given by one person to another, or more precisely, by the sovereign to an agent of the sovereign, such that the former’s power is increased through the actions of the latter. The agent acts not for him (her)self but for the sovereign. In addition, the implication in examples in these dictionaries was that power is given to an individual, not a class or other large grouping. We will suggest that these
approaches both reflect an essentialist view of power, one in which power is considered as an essence, a thing or resource.

Such a perspective is the common one in organization studies, and is reflected in Dahl’s frequently quoted definition: "A has power over B to the extent that he (sic) can get B to do something that B would otherwise not do" (1957, p. 201-3). This definition is used in recent work devoted to organizational power, (e.g. Pfeffer, 1981), and reflects a taken-for-granted concept in mainstream management today.

In spite of its great usefulness to the field of organization studies, an essentialist view of power is limited (e.g. Hardy & Clegg, 1996). Poststructuralist theorists (e.g., Foucault, 1980; Clegg, 1994) suggest that such a definition is implicitly a sovereign approach to power, one that more or less explicitly locates power in the hands of a relatively small number of individuals, an elite, whose potentially repressive actions are backed up by implied or real violence. Such an understanding is quite sensible within pre-democratic societies in which a sovereign did indeed wield such unilateral power. It directs attention to the fact that some individuals have power in any given setting while many individuals do not.

Poststructuralist approaches suggest an alternate understanding. For example, Foucault’s (1980, p. 90) concern was to offer an understanding that stresses “no binary [or] all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled” and which instead stresses a notion of power as an arrangement of relations among large numbers of social actors to which all members have a voice, albeit unequal. Such an approach perhaps allows us make better sense of post-democratic societal relations. Foucault stresses that power, within the domain of his ‘historico-theorizing,’ is a macro variable that is significantly different from the individualist micro understanding of the ‘law-sovereign’ conceptualization which locates power in the hands of a limited number of great sovereigns. The poststructuralist approach also focuses on the construction of organizational reality in and through discourse.¹ Thus we will call it a discursive approach.

Clegg (1994) suggested that:

After Foucault, the functioning of power is not something that can be tracked simply to some sovereign subject through control of resources, whether they be resource dependencies, strategic contingencies, ruling class control of capital or ruling elite control of key positions in the bureaucratic apparatus. One is not trying to describe who has the power so much as to ask where

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is the power, what is the power (p. 24)

Thus, this perspective implies the location of power in the rules of organizing rather than in the explicit power of certain organizational members, although powerful organizational members may have set the rules of organizing more than others. Such rules are numerous and frequently taken for granted, e.g., who attends or speaks longest in board meetings. From the perspective of Foucault, "power is embedded in the interstices that normalize and routinize everyday life in organizations through performance appraisals, audits, selection mechanisms, promotion procedures, tenure mechanisms... (Thompson, 1993, p. 199)."

The discursive conception of power starts from very different premises than the traditional conception of power in the hands of the law, sovereign or CEO. Rather than seeking to establish who are the power-holders, it sees power in the unquestioned rules of the organization or other larger setting. This structural-discursive seeks to have these very rules questioned. Figure 1 summarizes this discussion.²

Insert Figure 1 about here

Organizational literature regarding power.

Organizational research in the past forty years has emphasized several approaches to power, such as resource dependence, symbolic approaches, and strategic contingencies models. These all reflect an essentialist viewpoint. A significant influence on the work of many organizational theorists was the research of social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven (1959), whose work offers a cogent account of the sources or bases of power among individuals. French and Raven conceptualize power similarly to Dahl's definition, whereby power is conceived of as influence over another (1959, p. 150) in a 'zero-sum' game. The implicit emphasis was on power that people have because of certain attributes, such as legitimacy or resources they possess. Like French and Raven’s (1959) work, many organizational behavior approaches tend to focus more on individuals and subgroups than on the rules of overarching social structures which are so powerful as to be unquestioned. However, regardless of whether they focus on individuals or subgroups in themselves or individuals or subgroups in relationship, most organizational approaches to power assume that power is something an individual or subgroup has to some extent.³

Writings aimed at managers, or practitioner approaches, are somewhat consistent with these academic organizational behavior models of power. In the past thirty years a number of books, such as Korda’s (1975)
Power!, Jay’s (1968) Management and Machiavelli, and Mueller’s (1990) Risk, survival, and power, among many others, have advised managers on how to gain power for themselves. In both academic and managerial approaches to power, the emphasis has tended to be on how much power one has oneself, with the implicit notion being a zero sum orientation. Again, the assumed conceptualization of power is essentialist.

There is another historical tradition in the study of power in management as well, an approach that is consistent with (though not informed by) the poststructuralist work which takes a structural, discursive approach. This approach is exemplified by Tannenbaum and his collaborators (e.g. Tannenbaum, 1968; Tannenbaum, Kavcic, Rosner, Vianello and Wieser, 1974), who distinguished between power as zero sum and an expandable pie. A zero sum orientation, consistent with the essentialist view, suggests that there is a limited amount of power, such that if one group has a certain amount of power another group cannot have access to this power. An expandable pie notion, on the other hand, suggests that power is potentially expandable, and that one group’s having power is not necessarily predicated on another group’s sacrifice. Tannenbaum and his collaborators conducted a number of studies demonstrating that power was not a fixed sum in organizations. Rather, some organizations managed, by particular power sharing efforts, to expand the total amount of power available, while other organizations reduced the amount of power available. This research helped lay the basis for an understanding of power as something that could, potentially at least, be given without being lost.

These distinctions in the organizational literature help us elaborate Figure 1 for organizational settings in a way that has implications for empowerment. In Figure 1 we suggested that essentialist views of power generally implied a micro orientation which suggests that power and empowerment are understood primarily in terms of the individual managers or organizational members affected. Discursive views of power, on the other hand, generally reflected a macro and structural orientation. It is important to note that the terms macro and structural are not synonyms. Macro may refer to large groups of people but need not include a structural understanding that captures the “rules” of the interactions among the people comprising the group. A structural understanding on the other hand, does not necessarily suggest a large group of people. One may have a structural understanding of a small family. We conflate the two to a degree here because their overlap is both possible and frequent; as we noted above, rules of organizing are often set by powerful groups.

Our discussion of organizational literature also enables us to distinguish between approaches to power that
focus on it being claimed or given. The main distinction is whether someone delegates power to others or whether people claim power for themselves. This dual divergence in understandings of empowerment is shown in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 here

The first distinction in Figure 2 is between micro and macro approaches. A micro approach, as we are using the term and as consistent with early definitions of empowerment, suggests a predominantly individual or subgroup unit of analysis, in which the focus is on a person or subgroup as empowered or not. We note that 'lurking' behind this notion is the possibility of power being increased through empowerment mechanisms for the individual already holding power, e.g., the sovereign (CEO). A macro approach, as we are using the term, suggests a much more broad level of analysis, in which the focus is on the configuration of social relations and social structures with regard to, say, degree of self-determination on the part of particular gender or racial groups. Behind such a conceptualization 'lurks' a concept of power as being diffused among the social relations. From this perspective, reconfiguring social relations will bring change to the entire system.

We have suggested that in organizational literature theorists often take micro approaches to empowerment. They focus on a predominantly individual or subgroup unit of analysis in which empowerment is signified in terms of the fulfillment of job obligations and relates to job motivation (e.g. Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). In contrast, social theorists who take a more macro approach are often informed by critical theories that seek to de-naturalize the status quo with an eye to raising consciousness about large scale social structures, which have hitherto gone unquestioned. Such approaches have been more characteristic of social science disciplines such as social work and sociology (e.g. Smith & Douglas, 1990).

Our second distinction in Figure 2 is between approaches to empowerment that focus on whether power is “taken” or “given,” (delegated) i.e., claimed by some on behalf of themselves or their social grouping or developed in others. In contrast to the micro-macro distinction, there is not a lengthy theoretical lineage or debate regarding this particular distinction. However, as we noted above, the early definitions in the seventeenth century clearly implied a delegation of power by one person to another. This emphasis is continued in management writing that discusses managers' delegation of decision-making authority to their subordinates (e.g. Atchison, 1991; Coleman, 1995). In contrast, some discussions of empowerment in recent years have emphasized the need of groups or individuals such as minorities and women to claim power for themselves. Such claiming has been particularly
salient in sociological writings. In addition, we noted that applied and scholarly managerial writings that address power rather than empowerment often focus on individuals claiming power for themselves (e.g. Korda, 1975; Pfeffer, 1981).

The two dimensions in Figure 2, micro-macro and giving or delegating power, are not orthogonal. In particular, there is a tendency empirically, if not philosophically, for those who take more macro approaches to empowerment to emphasize particular social groups claiming, rather than giving, power. For example, sociologists such as Aronowitz (1998) emphasize the collective power of ordinary people and speak of ways in which their mobilization can lead to their claiming power from an elite.

In fact, relationships between views of power and typical approaches to empowerment can be linked. We have noted that power originally was thought of as an essentialist resource belonging to a sovereign (essentialist power). Associated with this notion of power is the cognate ‘empowerment’ which implies that an agent of a sovereign was given power through extension of the sovereign’s rule, to carry out the sovereign’s will (essentialist empowerment). Less individualistic concepts of power have been promulgated which bring attention to the configuration of relations among and between all members of a particular social grouping and the discourse, which makes these configurations commonsensical (discursive, structural power). The associated conceptualization of empowerment (discursive, structural empowerment) that emanates from this conceptualization is concerned with a conscious reconfiguration of relations such that groupings hitherto lacking in power would be empowered.

We have suggested above that power within organizational settings is often considered from an essentialist perspective, and that original meanings of empowerment in the seventeenth century also were within this perspective. However, the term empowerment was not used in management settings in the US until late in this century, when it was adapted from the counter cultural movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its use in the countercultural movements reflected a discursive, structural approach. However, its use in management has reflected more of an essentialist approach. We summarize this shift below.

THE SOCIAL-HISTORICAL LOCATION OF THE TERM EMPOWERMENT IN USA
COUNTERCULTURES

We assert in this paper that the current emphasis on empowerment in management, if not the manner of emphasizing empowerment in management, evolved out of counter-culture liberation movements beginning in the 1960s. These movements focused on empowerment in a very different way from its original understandings in the seventeenth century. The switch in understandings has interacted with power as typically conceived in organizations to affect understandings of empowerment in organizations today.

To situate our argument, we suggest how the new understandings of empowerment in the liberation movements were adapted for organizations. Our assertion is supported by Art Kleiner’s (forthcoming) interview with Peter Block, whose book *The Empowered Manager* (1987), is widely acknowledged as having explicitly brought the term managerial empowerment into the workplace.

Kleiner describes the evolution of understandings of empowerment in management thinking, drawing upon interviews with Block and others. He writes that according to Block the term “empowerment emanated from the Black Panthers, and was further developed in the women’s movement.” According to Kleiner, Block recalled that the term meant “finding ways to stand against the abuse of power.” “Institutions”, he said, “abused people just by their nature; to empower people meant to stop colluding with the abuse.” Since Block has been so influential in empowerment efforts in management, the trend toward an explicit focus on empowerment of managers can thus be situated on the heels of the cultural phenomena of the movements of Black Power and women’s liberation.

Both the Black Power and Women's liberation movements beginning in the mid 1960s stressed the social embeddedness of people, affirming their right to co-determine social relations by acknowledging oppression as a large scale structural, not just an individual, phenomenon. As such, these movements took a *macro* approach to empowerment (Figure 2). This conceptualization of power is related to that of poststructuralists’ in that it views power as the result of the configuration of social relations.

The liberation movements also focused on *claiming* power, on the power of the voiceless to determine what counts as reality. The understanding of empowerment as a capacity for self determination on the part of large social groupings became central to the approaches of many disciplines, including social work (e.g., Solomon, 1976, 1990), clinical and community psychology (e.g., Dunst & Trivette, 1987; Fabricant, 1986), education (Freire 1970; 1973), and liberation theology (Gutierrez, 1973; 1983). We briefly summarize below how power was understood
in each of these movements.

**Black Power**

In the preface to his 1967 book *The Impossible Revolution*, Killian (p. xv) wrote that "the crisis facing the nation was one of Black Power, in all its forms, versus white power." He noted that the insistence on the importance of power separated the Black Panthers from others involved in the "Negro revolution." The Panthers sought to radically question and change the roots and values of American society, rather than merely to seek a more comfortable place. In a recent book about that period in African American history, McCartney (1992, p. 120) draws attention to the agreement on the meaning of power in the black community: "The first characteristic is the almost identical use of the term ‘power’ in relation to blacks as a group."

Stokely Carmichael, a leader in the Black Panther movement, defined power as the ability to define oneself and one’s relationship to society and to have that definition acknowledged. Carmichael (1969, p. 99) noted, "we [blacks] shall have to struggle for the right to create our own terms through which to define ourselves, and our relationship to society, and to have these terms recognized". Black theologian James Cone (1969, p.5) suggested that "Black Power means Black Freedom, Black self determination, wherein Black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as men (sic), human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny". Huey Newton (1973, p. 120), another Black Panther, spoke of power in a similar way: "for us the true definition of power is not in terms of how many people you can control, to us power is the ability to first of all define phenomena, and secondly, the ability to make these phenomena act in a desired manner." In finding elements of agreement among these definitions, McCartney (1992, p. 120) suggests that they stress "the ability of blacks to define states A and B, the ability to state if A or B are desirable and the ability to institute these desired states."

**Women's Liberation**

There was a similar concern with the ability to define an alternative reality among feminist theorists. Judith Vaughan (1983, p. 172) wrote that “The moral responsibility for those who are powerless and assigned to subordinate positions in society is to reclaim the power that is rightfully theirs by virtue of being human. It is to demand the power to define themselves in relationship to others and to co-determine what reality becomes.” Again, power is defined as power of a group of people, in this case women, to determine their own lives within the
material, social context in which they live.

Similarly, in her paradigm building Toward a New Psychology of Women (1976), Jean Baker Miller discussed the internal self-exile from the patriarchal worldview that takes place as women grow conscious of structural oppression. Such an exile involves coming to see that sexist treatment is not "one's own fault" but that structural oppression exists. Thus, far from blaming oneself, one ought to be angry. In a discussion of Miller's work, Hampson (1988, p. 242) suggests that this process of self-exile "is a process of empowerment. It is a coming to a new reality." She ascribes the empowerment paradigm to self-conscious feminists, and possibly women in general, and she suggests that it is not present in the Western tradition in any significant way.

These approaches in black power and women's liberation movements, which included both taking power for oneself and emphasizing social groupings that had historically been on the margins, might be said to emphasize a desire for the opportunity to determine the parameters of societal structures and a desire for proactive self-definition. They emphasized that wide ranges and groupings of people might legitimately search for greater self-definition.

EMPOWERMENT MIGRATES TO THE WORK WORLD VIA THE HUMAN POTENTIAL MOVEMENT

Empowerment as Instituted by Practitioners

The liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s were essentially about re-imagining and co-creating a new society, a macro approach. Much, though not all, of the human potential movement which gained prominence at about the same time, and in which the term empowerment was used a great deal, focused more intently on the re-imagining of individuals, a more micro approach. Sensitivity training and similar types of efforts illustrated this. The work of Werner Erhard is a good example of this focus on individuals. He developed EST training, since reconceived as the popular "Landmark Forum," which has been used by many in organizational life to develop empowerment (Wruck & Eastley, 1997). In an interview with Kleiner (forthcoming), Erhard said that he had taken the word empowerment, then rampant in the [macro] counterculture around him, and tried to give it new meaning. Empowerment would now mean "finding the beauty in yourself;" or "getting in touch with who you really are." Powerful people were not those who oppressed others, but those who could communicate more effectively, who could express themselves, who could exercise (in a term Erhard borrowed from Martin Heidegger) "being in the
world."

In his interview with Kleiner (forthcoming) Peter Block suggested some of the ways counterculture liberation movements and the human potential movements came together to affect empowerment processes in the workplace. Block recalled that many OD practitioners in the 1970s were former sixties activists. He himself had left Esso and begun consulting, and he worked regularly with 28 and 29 year olds who “wanted to make a living and raise kids. They’d developed their skills in poverty programs, or in civil rights. The opening of the spirit, and of the heart, affected everyone. Corporate America felt like ‘part of the problem.’"

Other early writing about and/or histories of Organization Development confirm that early approaches to the field linked its change strategies with those of social movements prevalent in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For example, Hornstein, Bunker, Burke, Gindes, and Lewicki’s (1971) compendium of approaches to social intervention discussed individual approaches, techno-structural approaches, data based strategies, Organization Development, violence and coercion, and non-violence and direct action as the various strategies that might be used for accomplishing social change that implicitly, if not explicitly, empowered people. French’s (1985) summary of the history of Organization Development confirmed that t-groups were one of its primary roots, along with survey feedback and sociotechnical approaches.

As Mirvis (1988) has suggested, many who entered Organization Development or related fields (then and now) have done so for quasi spiritual reasons; they want to co-create a better world, often through democratizing the workplace. For example, Kurt Lewin a German Jew who escaped the Nazis, developed notions of participatory democracy (and much of the other conceptual basis for Organization Development) as a viable long-term alternative to Nazism and totalitarianism generally. Similarly, Chris Argyris (e.g., Argyris, 1990) asked how organizations might be redesigned in such a way that people who value personal development, as expressed in the desire for success and self esteem, might experience them as places in which to continue their development; in turn the organizations would find value in involving such members. This potentially synergistic relationship would ideally help create the capacity for developing a better future society.

Because of its multiple roots, from its earliest years Organization Development included not only individual, but also system level approaches to change. One of the primary assumptions was that a larger social grouping had to change for an individual to succeed in changing (e.g. French, 1985). However, contrary to many
social movements focusing on revolution against the “top,” there has always been an agreed upon assumption in OD that change is approved by the top of the organization (e.g. Hornstein et al., 1971), that it does not seek to overthrow social structures. In addition, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was agreement among many OD practitioners that individual approaches to change were more effective in stimulating in-depth change than other approaches. In an often-cited paper published in 1970, for example, Roger Harrison (1970) advocated t-groups and similar activities as achieving the greatest “depths” of effects; interventions dealing with the organization’s structure were considered more superficial. Erhard’s EST training focused on individuals and sought to disabuse them of their assumptions about what works for them in life, so as to foster personal transformation. Transformation included affirmation of one’s capacity for creating a future one wants through letting go, or recognizing that one’s old patterns can be dropped, and quickly. EST offered the vision of a world in which people allow themselves to really “get” that they create their circumstances by choice. Empowerment under these conditions was the grasping of this fact at a visceral level and taking responsibility for choosing well. Thus obstacles were to be dealt with from an orientation to the future, i.e., asking “what is the possibility I wish to create here?” rather than an orientation to the past, i.e., “how did this happen?” (Wruck and Eastley, 1997).

This summary discussion suggests that, beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there have been both similarities in and differences between larger social movements and change currents in organizations that focus on empowering people. The focus in larger social movements was on change from below, marginalized groups claiming power for themselves and seeking to alter social structures. The sense in Organization Development and similar types of organizational change efforts was that there could be both individual and system wide changes towards greater democratization, but individual change was more important. In addition, in organizations, system-wide change had to be sanctioned by top management. In other words, while organizational change interventions might lead to a greater sense of individual power at work, that sense depended on top management delegating the authority to some extent. Thus, while macro (discursive) approaches to empowerment were valued, an essentialist aspect was also necessary. Someone from above had to give the power that led to the system-wide changes.

**Empowerment as described by Organizational Scholars**

The material above suggests ways empowerment evolved into organizational behavior. What are current understandings of empowerment in this field?
While the popular and practitioner organizational literature on empowerment has been voluminous for years, it is only relatively recently that the construct has received scholarly conceptualization and measurement. Consistent with applied approaches, most scholarly approaches to empowerment in organizations emphasize the individual more than the larger social grouping. In particular, they focus on individual self-efficacy. For example, Conger and Kanungo (1988) stress the motivational element of empowerment, whereby organizational empowerment is seen as a win-win situation for both employers and employees. Powerlessness is removed by means of delegating decision making in order to encourage self efficacy and self determination. They treat empowerment as a motivational construct which is "critical when employees feel powerless" (474). Conger (1989) later offered a conceptualization of leadership, which is defined wholly in terms of empowering employees.

Thomas and Velthous (1990) also take an individual approach, but focus their attention on the actual psychological processes of individuals in organizations. They suggest that four cognitions are necessary for the experience of empowerment: choice, progress, competence, and meaningfulness. A scale measure of empowerment using these variables was later developed by Thomas and Tymon, (1993). They propose that the feeling of empowerment is situational. For example, one might feel empowered when speaking in public but not when studying physics.

Gretchen Spreitzer has been most active during the 1990s in studying dimensions of empowerment at work. She created a measurement instrument for assessing individual aspects of psychological empowerment (1995). She has also (1996) assessed social structural characteristics of work places that affect how empowered middle managers feel there. She found that managers in work units with characteristics of high involvement work places such as little role ambiguity, strong sociopolitical support, access to information, and a participative work climate were more likely to experience themselves as empowered. With Robert Quinn (1996), Spreitzer studied the effectiveness of a large scale management development program at the Ford Motor company aimed at empowering middle managers to become transformational leaders. Results of this study indicated that managers’ levels of self-esteem, job affect, and social support had significant impacts on their ability to undertake transformational change in their organizations. These results were consistent with the notion that managers’ individual levels of felt empowerment affected their ability to learn new leadership methods. Spreitzer, de Janasz, and Quinn (forthcoming) have also found that managers who feel empowered are more likely to be innovative, upward influencing, and
inspirational.

Spreitzer’s work, as is the case with other organizational scholarship, focuses primarily on individual managers, although it also emphasizes the positive impacts on others these managers can have in their organization (Spreitzer et al., in press). In scholarly writing the focus continues to be primarily on individual managers and their learning. There are no large scale social structural critiques of or challenges to work arrangements, although there is recognition that structures consistent with a high involvement organization tend to be more facilitative of an experience of individual empowerment (Spreitzer, 1996). There is implicit in this work, however, a sense that power does not have to be taken from others. Rather, empowerment can be given or delegated in subtle ways, for example by influencing characteristics of people’s jobs (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), or by creating high involvement work places (Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996).

COMPARING EMPOWERMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS AND LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

When we hear of work place empowerment, is it the same empowerment that the Black Panthers spoke of? It is not a stretch to suggest that the macro/social structural focus that was central to the liberation movements is not present in the more micro organizational approach.

Although empowerment came into management in large part because of the liberation movements, it did not take on all of the macro characteristics of these movements. However, developing means of giving power are much more likely to occur within the micro framework as it occurs in organizations than within the macro framework of liberation movements. As Spreitzer and Quinn’s (1996) work suggests, approaches to delegating power are much better developed with regard to discrete jobs in organizations than large social groupings. Specific means of power being truly empowering (Hampson, 1988), albeit as specific individuals within already established frameworks rather than as members of larger movements aimed at altering social structures, have been conceptualized more for management settings than for large social movements.

Has the concept of empowerment as it was expressed in social movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s been co-opted to allow employers get more out of their overworked employees? Certainly a critical orientation to the facts might suggest that possibility, at least with regard to possible shifts in social structures. For example TQM has placed considerable emphasis on employee participation and empowerment. When power is thought of from a micro/delegating perspective, TQM has brought some organizations to be flatter and more
flexible. There is also a darker side of this movement. Boje and Winsor (1993), for example, propose that TQM masquerades as progress when, in fact, it is the "resurrection of oppressive Taylorism" (1993, p. 57). The insidious mask of empowerment as it relates to teamwork is especially bothersome to Boje and Winsor. In their critique, teamwork is seen to be the perpetuation of surveillance and control, while employee voice is seen to be the co-option of control.

There are some ways in which this critique is undoubtedly true. However, it ignores positive contributions of TQM and similar approaches, such as an enhanced appreciation of quality and greater learnings about how to affect one’s work place. Thus, rather than simply critiquing managerial approaches, we want to offer an alternative explanation. We suggest that there is good reason for the different approaches, and that the structural perspective of the liberation movements typically associated with claiming power and the more micro perspective of the organizational world that sometimes enables delegating power complement each other in ways that potentially transcend the apparent dichotomy between the two approaches.

**Reasons for Differences in Perspectives.**

A major reason for the different perspectives taken by those in the liberation movements and those in organizational practice and scholarship is the different subject positions of the people in these arenas. Subject position refers to an individual's social-historical location in society and the practical concerns and interests that result from this position (e.g. Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). The notion of subject position suggests that, for example, one’s living in a suburb or an inner city will have an impact on how one theorizes about, and acts in, the world. In black power movements in particular there were people whose work derived from the material concerns of their everyday living and who needed self-determination. In the human potential movement and many of the similar work place innovations that began to occur in the late 1960s there were many essentially upwardly mobile professionals, men and women, for whom obstacles to success were less structural and more psychical. From this point of view, liberation from oppressive structures has been much less a material concern of the management ranks which traditionally are peopled by society's middle and upper classes. Managers, more than many other people, embody a self understanding that is linked to being effective in the world. Thus, for managers, giving power to others may be more possible than for people in other subject positions.

Our suggestion that type of perspective depends in part on one’s subject position implies that people
holding different subject positions and operating out of different perspectives regarding empowerment are both important. Rather than setting one approach against the other, it is more useful to consider ways the two approaches may both be correct in important ways. We address this issue below.

**The Contributions of Structuration**

For Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1977) social scientific study is concerned with neither a pre-given, nor a constructed, universe of objects, but with a universe that is constituted or produced by the active doings of subjects. There is an implicit critique in their work of both the micro human potential movement and macro liberation movements because the former focuses attention on the individual as if the individual has the capacity to somehow transcend the social structures in which s/he lives and works, while the latter focuses attention outward on the creation of new structures as if it is possible to have new structures without also internally transformed people to enact them.

According to a structuration approach, human beings produce society, but they do so as historically located actors, and often not under conditions of their own choosing. For example, the interaction between a boss and subordinate is both limited and enabled by the social-historical circumstances of their interaction. We might think their interaction as constrained by the degree of formality with which they interact; this formality, however, also prescribes the parameters of interaction, so both are enabled in advance to know what is and what is not acceptable behavior. In this way both affect and action are affected by the structure under which they interact.

Structuration suggests that our disposition toward empowerment, involving both sharing and taking power, creates and is created by the pattern of interactions in which we are routinely involved, but that our involvement also enhances these patterns. Empowerment and understandings of its directionality must therefore be treated as an experience that links individual and social structural characteristics, both giving and receiving power.

**What does a structuration approach suggest for empowerment and organizations?** Poole and Van de Ven (1989) suggest that one way of resolving apparent paradoxes is to seek new concepts to resolve them, terms that enable them to be looked at from a more inclusive level. Their advice is applicable here. Attention to both the macro and micro, as well as to both giving (delegating) and taking (claiming) dimensions of organizing draws attention to the situation of organizations within the larger society.

Figure 3 presents a summary of how thinking from a ‘both/and’ perspective allows us see the limits and
advantages to the different ways of defining empowerment. Basically, this figure suggests that approaches to power that focus on both individuals and large scale social groupings such as organizational settings, both giving and receiving power, have both value and downsides. In particular, while macro approaches typically suggest much more in-depth challenges to particular social relationships, micro approaches are much easier to work with.

Insert Figure 3 here

It may be possible to advance constructive suggestions regarding this kind of dilemma from a both/and perspective. Empowerment depends upon both the structures in place (which include norms of giving and taking power) within our larger society and on the individuals (and their subject positions) through whom the norms and structures are maintained. Empowerment may be understood in a manner that includes both levels, as establishing self efficacy such that one individual-in-relation can co-determine larger patterns of behavior (i.e., structures, including structures of giving and receiving) by which s/he wants to live.

**Implications for Organizational Empowerment**

Several suggestions have been made about how such an organizational form of empowerment may be achieved. One possible means of achieving a larger view of empowerment is through a form of dialogue in which the discussion of organizational rules and structures is encouraged of all organizational members from the perspective of their subject positions. Such a language based practice as suggested by Bohm (1990) and developed by Isaacs (1993) and Schein (1999) is currently being empirically tested in large U.S. corporations (Clark, Cottrell, Cushman, Hustelton, Yantzi, 1994). Its basis in language makes it a particularly appropriate practice in which all members of an organization come together to engage in a critical conversation on perceptions of organizational reality.

Further, some recent writings, such as Ray and Rinzler’s (1993) practitioner-oriented “new paradigm” and Clegg’s (1992) more theoretical postmodern organization, suggest means of organizing that are aimed at being empowering from both individual and social system perspectives. For example, Ray and Rinzler’s (1993) “new paradigm” organizing has a place for social and organizational justice, not only efficiency and profit. Ray and Rinzler suggest that the overarching objectives of new paradigm business are essentially the awakening and personal development of everyone associated with it and the corresponding service to the surrounding community.
People practicing business in this way base their actions on the guiding principles of wholeness and connectedness in a systems theory sense. Implicitly, the power they have is available for both sharing and claiming. The emphasis on personal development is redolent of the organizational emphasis on self efficacy, while the emphasis on service to the community is redolent of the liberation movements concerns. These issues are also given clear mention in the popular practice of the “learning organization” as described by Senge (1990; Senge et al., 1994).

In addition, Clegg (1992) has enumerated several attributes of postmodern forms of organizing: diffusion of goals and functions, democracy, empowerment, collectivized reward systems, flexibility, long term perspectives, leadership based on trust and open information sharing. He proposes that postmodern organizations enhance empowered organizational and economic citizenship. He suggests that, where empowerment flourishes, it will change both organizational and individual, (i.e., relational and intrapsychic) structures such that a wholly new mode of organizing may emerge. Clegg suggests that if empowerment efforts remain at micro levels without seeking to incorporate a systemic view of the implications of empowerment, they will be meaningless and a cause of deep cynicism among workers upon whom they are inflicted. On the other hand, if the emphasis is only on social structural change, it is unlikely that individual people will be able to develop the capacity to act as they truly wish.

Finally, from a ‘both/and’ perspective of attention to individualist and structural components of empowerment, we must recognize that the embeddedness of the organization within larger social, political and (natural) environmental systems suggests its importance as a locus of large scale institutional change. Commerce, the term itself is rooted in the Latin coniis to eat together, developed as a way in which people could get things done that they alone could not achieve (Hawken, 1993). Estes (1996) noted that corporations were initially chartered by governments to serve the public good. Originally the family name was the individual's bond; transactions were between pre-industrial merchants rather than individuals per se (Kleiner, 1996, p. 6). This changed under capitalism, where the exchange of goods is an economic transaction and not the expression of community spirit. To the extent that organizations solely privilege a market logic in which the interests of an organization's stakeholders (employees, owners, community, natural environment) are subsidiary to financial interests of an organization, individual and groups of stakeholders, are, in effect, disempowered. Practices of an unfettered market are condemned perhaps most eloquently by those who have been successful under the system it provides (c.f., billionaire George Soros, 1997). There are calls for business to reassess its social responsibility by reevaluating
what it is we wish our market system to value (e.g., Bookchin, 1990). To date it would appear that many of these efforts do not yet raise questions beyond the internal confines of the organization. To what extent does awareness of the larger social system in which most business is transacted affect the empowerment of managers? How much should it? How much do organizational approaches that facilitate the delegating of power to greater numbers of organizational members allow them to impact this larger system?

CONCLUSION

Thinking of empowerment from both individual and structural perspectives enables us to attend to tensions between individuals seeking to come into full expression and already established larger social structures that both limit and facilitate empowered behavior. It also enables us to attend to tensions between delegating and claiming power, and to look at what types of power are delegated and/or claimed.

Contrary to liberation movements that were the basis for the introduction of empowerment into work organizations, empowerment for managers has often involved developing means of empowering others, at least within a limited sphere. Again contrary to these movements, it often has not involved an openness to examining the wider social/historical tradition within which work is done. Emphases of social movements can thus be informed to some extent by workplace empowerment initiatives. Social movements can also remind those who undertake workplace empowerment that empowerment is more than a way to improve an employee's ability to get pre-determined goals achieved.

It is important to be aware of potential misalignments between understandings of empowerment and underlying conceptualizations of power. Where there are misalignments, people may be at cross purposes, with expectations that can only be disappointed. However, if the inconsistencies are made explicit, such misalignments may also result in creative tensions. While it may be naive to believe that social systems may change overnight, it may also be naive to believe they cannot change radically. Much as democracy was considered immoral only a few centuries ago, at least in the views of the literate elite supported by monarchical power, so too may today's workplaces evolve through tensions of power and empowerment. Thus to think historically is to remain open to the dynamics of change. To paraphrase the sociologist C. Wright Mills: In our time, what is at issue is the very nature of the configuration of work relations, the image we have and possibilities. History is not yet done with its exploration of what it means to be empowered.
An inexorable trend toward empowerment in organizational life was noted in the late 1980s (Shrivasta and associates, 1988). Increases in education, civil rights, individual wealth, symmetrical patterns of interdependence among buyers and sellers in long and complex value chains is gradually shifting the nature of power and the nature of business to new levels of mutual influence. It is possible that managers are increasingly willing to give up degrees of unilateral control in return for economic success. Further, such popular notions as the learning organization (Senge, 1990) assume empowerment, although they do not expressly sound like an intervention for empowerment. Thus, they may be acceptable to power conscious management, while possibly catalyzing a firm wide discourse that is empowering for organizational members.

We have suggested that workplace empowerment might have the potential to be understood as practices at the individual level that take into account and are informed by implications at other levels of the systems in which they take place. For researchers this suggests that the focus of analysis when studying empowerment must not remain at only one level, either individual or larger social structure, or only claiming power for one’s own self or group or helping to develop it in others. There must be reference to multiple levels, to the wider social-historical structures and to the larger environment in which the organization resides, and to the individual who helps create these structures. There must also be attention to the norms these individuals and structures create in terms of both the giving and taking of power. These practices are about enhancing individual empowerment such that one individual-in-relation is able to co-determine structures by which we, as stakeholders in the broader community, wish to live.

NOTES

¹ This term has a particular and important meaning in poststructuralism. Discourse is not speech per se. Rather, discourse allows speech to be possible. Discourse arises in the intersection of power and knowledge to allow a person’s words to make sense. Discourse pre-determines what can be said such that it can be understood. For example, there is a discourse about addiction that allows alcoholism to be seen as a medical problem. Not so long
ago it was more common to understand alcoholism as a personal weakness. This contemporary discourse is the result of the interplay of specialists in the medical field and the social power society bestows on such people. Similarly there is a discourse which allows it to make sense that women be CEO’s. Again, some decades ago such an utterance would not have made sense because that discourse did not pre-exist the words.

As with most summaries, this is a simplification. For example, Salancik and Pfeffer’s (1973; 1977) approach to the conceptualization of power is macro organizational, though essentialist, thus giving but one of many examples that show that any simple dichotomization may be misleading if taken too literally. Nonetheless, the dichotomization is helpful, as even Pfeffer’s (1981) more macro inclinations are primarily anchored in an individualist understanding of power. This is exemplified by his definition of “the new golden rule” pivotal to a resource understanding of power, “he (sic) who has the gold makes the rule.”

Work concerning power by other organizational theorists is important to note. For Mintzberg (1983) the organization is a decision making body, which, because there are too many decisions for one person, leads to delegation and thence to the spread of power. In this regard he is more optimistic than other theorists e.g., Kanter, who saw power in a more pessimistic light: "power is likely to bring more power, in ascending cycles, and powerlessness to generate powerlessness, in a descending cycle" (Kanter, 1977, p. 196). Mintzberg also assumes the bases of power described by French and Raven (1959). In addition he adds that individual 'will' and 'skill' are necessary catalysts to the possession of power. Mintzberg’s recognition of the external coalition marks him as a more macro theorist than French and Raven.

The Landmark Forum is no longer under the leadership of Werner Erhard. Erhard passed on the organization that had developed around him to his associates.
REFERENCES


12/12/98


**Divergence in conceptualizations of power in social and organization science theory**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptualization of power as:</th>
<th>Metaphor of power undergirding concept.</th>
<th>Micro-macro continuum.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Some individuals have power, most don’t.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discursive, e.g., Foucault, (1976); Clegg(1990)</td>
<td>Power as the rules of organizing expressed in the dynamic (re) configuration of relationships.</td>
<td>Macro conceptualization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Power is implicit in the practices and discourse that shape all people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Dimensions of power and empowerment

#### The Direction of Empowerment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Micro:</th>
<th>power is claimed</th>
<th>power is given</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of the Unit Involved</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individual or subgroup</td>
<td>example: Korda’s (1975)</td>
<td>example: Block’s (1987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>large social grouping</td>
<td>example: 1960s liberation movements</td>
<td>example: Corporatism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Power*
## Advantages and Limitations of the Empowerment Approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empowerment model</th>
<th>Who is implicated most</th>
<th>What is done</th>
<th>Opportunity</th>
<th>Challenge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essentialist/ Micro approach/delegation of power</td>
<td>Senior managers</td>
<td>Power is given to the lower ranks</td>
<td>Something actually gets done!</td>
<td>New technologies of repression may be created, albeit unwittingly, e.g., peer pressure of the TQM group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discursive/ Macro approach/claiming power</td>
<td>All equally (recognizes that ‘empowerment’ constructs unempowered subjects in need of power)</td>
<td>Discourse is reexamined for its usefulness</td>
<td>It is a radical undertaking with potential for large scale change. It requires large scale change interventions.</td>
<td>It is too daunting an undertaking. People may choose to say, “no, we keep the status quo because ‘they’ not ‘I’ have the power to change it.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>